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Context, class, and community: a methodological framework for studying labor organizing and digital unionizing

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ABSTRACT

A key debate in an increasingly digital environment is the tension between individuals and institutions with online engagement. An area that exemplifies this opposition is the study of digital unionizing. Labor studies scholarship tends to focus on institutions while communication research often privileges the individual. This article extends these two approaches by outlining three key considerations in what shapes online collective action within working-class and worker struggles: *context*, *class* and *community*. I also conceptualize this methodological framework to study digital unionizing and labor organizing more broadly, which I refer to as the 3C Method. The empirical foundation for this methodological argument derives from existing literature, as well as select findings from a three-year digital organizing research project.

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Introduction

By following the hashtags of labor union strikes on social media platforms, it would appear that digital collective action around worker issues has been expanding. Even within one sector over the past few years, American teachers, French train workers, and British university professors all went on large-scale strikes against policies that were depressing wages, threatening pensions, and accelerating privatization. News media accounts proliferated on how the internet facilitated these nationwide movements of public employee unions, from #RedForEd and #NoCapitulation to #JeSoutiensLesCheminots, suggesting that digital technology was not only key in connecting workers but also in generating solidarity from supporters. Yet these digitally visible labor campaigns on social media often fail to show the underlying dynamics of organizing efforts.

Labor scholars have shown that not all unions engage in digital technology in the same way (Scaramuzzino & Scaramuzzino, 2020), but it is unclear how widespread and integral digital technologies are to working-class movements. Research on the role of digital technology within unions often starts from the perspective of an organization. Most scholarship on digital unionizing, which I define as the use/s of various types of internet technologies for building a labor union or working-class movement, has focused on

specific campaigns or unions (Diamond & Freeman, 2002; Greene & Kirton, 2003; Thornthwaite et al., 2018), which has produced a rich body of literature on the possibilities and practices of labor organizing with the internet. While some studies have been comparative (Blanc, 2020; Carneiro, 2018; Rego et al., 2014), most research on the challenges and constraints of online unionizing has centered on either universal factors of unions and digitalization or specific situations.

Moreover, with the rise of sectors that are more isolated into gig work, a global tide has turned away from institutionalized workplaces toward more individualized jobs. This view of digital society as ‘networked individualism’ (Rainie & Wellman, 2012) contrasts with public-sector workers – and their unions – which struggle to maintain wages and jobs against the rise of privatization and this individuation. Therefore, a societal direction toward *individualized* labor and digital media may contrast with an inherent *institutionalized* labor union.

Digital activism literature has trended toward the unit of analysis not as an organization, like a trade union, but as either a movement or an individual (as a node) in a network, especially with the rise of hashtag research (Earl et al., 2013; Margetts et al., 2016; Tufekci, 2017). The role of the networked *individual*, whether a post or a person, often supersedes the role of structured *institutions* in empirical analyses and theoretical claims (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Many of the most visible digital activism movements, often generating the most research, from the Indignados in Spain to the Gilets Jaunes in France, have been explicitly anti-institution. Empirical data collection often targets high levels of event-based digital engagement, rather than the everyday practices and mechanisms of digital use. Furthermore, this broader body of scholarship on digital activism has implied that traditional labor unions are ‘old-school’ because of this institutional and top-down cleavage and are, thus, not amenable to the organization-less movement trend (e.g., Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

But this creates a puzzle for researching digital unionizing – and technology use among working class activists more broadly. The digital unionizing literature tends to zoom into into specific cases from the standpoint of a labor institution. However, the broader digital activism literature often zooms out from the standpoint of a networked individual. Neither approach – institutionalized or individualized – has been in direct conversation with the other. Understanding what factors may lead to more or less digital unionizing is more than a quantitative or qualitative decision, as both sets of literature cross this methodological divide. Moreover, with both forms of research, methods that focus on only one type of platform or hashtag are common (e.g., Gibney et al., 2013). Overall, a wholistic approach that can provide robust insight into differentiated uses among working-class activists is needed, especially analyses that incorporate the intersection of racialized and class power differences.

To overcome these weaknesses, a key question for scholars is *how* to approach the relationship between digital technologies and labor movements. Using a comparative case of public-sector labor organizing, I outline three key considerations for digital activism research of worker struggles: *context*, *class* and *community*, or what I call the 3C Method. This methodological framework to analyze digital unionizing expands on both sets of literature.

In so doing, this article is also an illustrative case-study of the 3C Method for understanding union activism in general, focusing in this instance on the role of digital technologies.

One cannot organize workers without some type of communication tool, whether word-of-mouth, paper, radio, fax, phones, or computers, but not everyone will incorporate or benefit from the latest innovation in the same way. The technology itself can have politics (Winner, 1980) or what many communication scholars dub ‘affordances’ (e.g., Nagy & Neff, 2015). Davis (2020) further refined this concept as to how objects, or digital technologies in this case, ‘shape action for socially situated subjects (2020, p. 6).’ Therefore, the internet can enable (or constrain) workers to organize, but these digital opportunities and challenges depend not just on who potential users are – based on *class*, for example – but also on the circumstances in which they are organizing – vis-a-vis *community* assemblages or geographic *context*. In short, these socially situated dynamics are structural differences that can shape digital use. While there are multiple forms of hardware, software, platforms, and other digital tools and services, a common view about the internet in general is that it can facilitate more democratic participation due to its architecture – rather than a radio, for example, that broadcasts one voice to many people, or the inefficiency of paper that must be physically delivered. According to this common argument, digital technology can propel fast many-to-many direct communication (Benkler, 2006), which could be ideal for participatory union organizing practices (Shostack, 1999). Much of the scholarship has been positive for the prospects of digital technology for unionizing, particularly in its potential for trade union democracy (Carter et al., 2003; Freeman & Rehavi, 2008; Greene & Kirton, 2003; Upchurch & Grassman, 2016). Yet this article reveals the multifaceted limitations of this argument because of the 3C’s.

The state of knowledge on context, class, and community

First, consider *context*. The type, location, and sector of the work not only factors into prospects for labor organizing generally but also for digital unionizing more specifically.

To begin with, the type of employment may shape digital unionizing. Public-sector employees have relatively secure jobs in comparison to the precarity of industrial, service, or platform workers. While public-sector outsourcing and privatizing has been on the rise (Barton & Fairbrother, 2008), the relative stability of teachers, firefighters, or sanitation workers seems to leave more room to maintain and even expand unionization, given the difficulty of moving the work overseas. Collective action for public employees, then, seems more feasible than that of an Uber driver or Deliveroo rider who struggle to even be classified as employees. Indeed, public workers have generally maintained unionization (Schmidt et al., 2018), compared to other sectors with falling union density rates. Despite some existing gig worker organizing (Salamon, 2020), we still might expect public employees to be able to engage in more extensive digital unionizing. One such example is the 2011 occupation of the Wisconsin state capital building, in an effort to maintain collective bargaining rights for public employees. Teachers and firefighters garnered national attention for their savvy use of social media (Karpf, 2012).

The location of work could also shape digital engagement. Platform workers, often working in isolation, could follow the line of reasoning that internet technologies can

facilitate collective action with less geographic proximity (Bimber, 1998; Earl & Kimport, 2011). Certainly, platform workers do use social media, browser plug-ins, and other apps to communicate around grievances, yet taking these features to the stage for union elections or effecting labor policy changes has proved more challenging *because* of the lack of physical co-presence (Graham & Hjorth, 2017). Still, other scholars have found that part-time workers use the internet more than their full-time counterparts in union activity (Kerr & Waddington, 2014). Balancing these situational work practices, such as seemingly more stable and full-time public-sector work, are thus key to analyzing digital unionizing.

Other contextual elements, such as labor history and conditions that vary by region, could also shape digital activism. For instance, the United States has one of the weakest sets of labor protection laws of any nation in the Global North, as well as low union density rates (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Some comparisons of digital unionizing between countries (Rego et al., 2014) or union types in areas with weak labor laws (Schradie, 2015) has shown that ideological differences within unions can shape how and how much they use the internet. Another dynamic that may vary by government is how surveillance threats or exposure of private lives on social media can make digital unionizing difficult (Chaison, 2002; Upchurch & Grassman, 2016). Therefore, geographic considerations could be a push or pull to digital unionizing.

The second structural issue for digital unionizing is social *class*. A key impact of class on collective action online is the digital divide. While wealthier countries have much higher internet penetration rates than their counterparts (Pearce & Rice, 2013), digital inequality based on socioeconomic differences persists in the U.S. and Europe (Hargittai & Jennrich, 2016). While other demographic variables, such as race, ethnicity, age, and gender all map onto digital usage levels, social class gaps remain the widest over time, particularly for political participation (Eveland & Scheufele, 2000; Mossberger et al., 2003; Schlozman et al., 2012; Smith, 2013). Social class constraints in the form of resources or skills can, indeed, limit digital activism (Eimhjellen et al., 2013; Merry, 2011; Schradie, 2018).

Yet social class is more than individual income or education levels. It is also about power differences (Wright, 2009), and controlling the digital means of production is key to online engagement (Schradie, 2011). Workers who feel disempowered at work may also feel disempowered online. Digital communication scholarship in general and online activism, in particular, suggests that trust is critical (Cheshire & Cook, 2004; Diani, 2004; Slovicl, 1993). For example, traditional communication, including face-to-face organizing, can enhance trust (Kerr & Waddington, 2014), which problematizes the role of digital technology with labor organizing.

Context and class, then, build on each other as the oppression of one racial category of people is often tied to class-based oppression. For instance, in the American South, the legacy of slavery has had a profound influence on workers' struggles since racism was socially constructed for primarily economic reasons by keeping workers enslaved and oppressed (Allen, 1974; Roediger & Esch, 2012). Therefore, this class dimension is key to extending approaches that treat the individual as a unit of analysis, as class *relations* may be fundamental to digital unionizing.

Finally, the question of *community*, both through networks and institutions, shows mixed results in the literature on digital activism. Labor unions are rarely described as

digitally savvy. They are often considered as traditional bureaucratic organizations deemed antithetical to the horizontally networked architecture of the internet (Earl et al., 2017). Other digital activism scholars simply point to the declining relevance of unions in the wake of neoliberalism (Bennett, 2014). Some studies suggest that union density is simply not a factor in the spread of digitally visible activism, such as with Occupy Wall Street in the United States (Vasi & Suh, 2016).

Some labor scholars suggest that other constraints of unions' organizational make-up may limit high levels of digital unionizing (Gibney et al., 2013). A common argument is that the individualization of digital technology's architecture makes it challenging to use for labor struggles that tend to focus more on the collective, such as (some) unions' democratic structures and decision-making processes (Fenton & Barassi, 2011; Upchurch & Grassman, 2016). In addition, according to the echo-chamber thesis, groups, including unions, tend to use social media in very limited networks (Carneiro, 2018; Guess et al., 2018; Sunstein, 2017).

The community factor is key in participatory labor organizing in general, so we would expect the same dynamic in digital unionizing. While many unions encourage member involvement with meetings, elections, and other participatory practices, others are embedded in non-democratic hierarchies. Various union democracy movements, though, have been fighting for transparency within union bureaucracies or incorporate community-based organizations into unionizing efforts, particularly in difficult-to-organize environments (Voss & Sherman, 2000). Both of these efforts are 'social movement unionism' as opposed to more bureaucratic 'business unionism' (Scopes, 1992; Turner & Hurd, 2001). Social movement unionism often struggles for broader democracy in society, not just for higher wages, so we might expect more digital use. At its core, though, social movement unionism requires institutional, or community, participation, not simply random individual participation, as much of the digital activism literature would suggest. However, the digital democracy argument often stems from the individuals' relationship with the technological tool itself, rather than from broader institutional and structural forces, so the question remains as to how these two processes interact.

Methodological considerations

The empirical foundation for this article's 3C methodological framework derives from existing literature, as well as select findings from a three-year digital activism research program across a state-wide political field in the United States. This conceptual article distills and incorporates targeted concepts and findings from the project's publications, as well as original qualitative data from fieldwork with unions and other organizations active in supporting public-sector worker union rights in the town and university (University of North Carolina – UNC) of Chapel Hill, North Carolina between 2011 and 2014. This locale has two elements that might lead to thinking that digital unionizing would be high: (1) a public-sector union movement that focuses on workplace democracy and social movement unionism; (2) a resource rich town in a Global North country.

Interviewees included leaders and members from the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Black Workers for Justice (BWFJ), Chapel Hill members of the State Employees Association of North Carolina and Local 150

(both unions of public-sector workers), American Association of University Professors, University of North Carolina Student Action with Workers (UNC-SAW), and other local activists. Rather than a data point, quotations presented here are used as illustrative and narrative support around the methodological concepts.

While this article does not focus on the measurement of digital engagement nor compare specific platforms, devices, or other tools, results show the public-sector union groups in Chapel Hill used the internet sparingly. Although predominant at the time across age-categories, one union rarely used Facebook and none used Twitter. While the student group had somewhat higher digital engagement levels than the unions and community groups, their rates were relatively low (Schradie, 2019). To situate these findings, I trace how *context*, *class* and *community* are intertwining processes for digital unionizing.

Situating the 3C's

Ron, a white man in his 60s, recalled going to an anti-union meeting with his dad when he was 12 years old.

My father was an outside adviser to one of these committees ... There were gunshots, I mean I don't think anybody was shooting at us individually, but trying to scare you ... I don't mean to paint that as a typical union or management activity, but what it did was cement in me that this is high stakes.

I sat down to talk to Ron while we were seated at a large wooden table in a conference room at his human resources consulting company. Dressed in formal business attire, Ron said this childhood experience shaped his views of collective bargaining. One of the state's leading anti-union advocates and a key figure in the effort to prevent collective bargaining for public employees, Ron was the person to whom local governments looked when their employees started to organize into unions. He was also the defacto head of the North Carolina Coalition for Jobs. Ron's job was to offer anti-union information as a consultant to local governments around the state. Ron said, 'Most public employers in the state don't know much about unions, and so we're there to analogize it to the private sector to give them some idea of what it's like.'

One such event occurred in Chapel Hill. Two Black sanitation workers and union members in the town's Public Works Department filed grievances against the town for violations of safe working conditions and racism in promotions. Soon after, the city fired them. The workers believed the firings were in retaliation for their union activity and sued both the town and its manager. The town of Chapel Hill called in Ron's firm. He described himself more as a 'neutral' party coming in to investigate and less on the presumption of guilt. 'We did an investigation of employee misconduct,' he told me.

But during a subsequent Chapel Hill town council meeting, Al, a Chapel Hill civil rights lawyer and activist with the NC NAACP, said of Ron's role,

I've never been as ashamed and appalled as I was when I began to read the contract that was signed with this union busting group that came in on the sly. I would like to know when and how the town hired this group and if the council was told what the group's purposes were.

Ron said that they were simply doing education and not consulting for the \$60,000 that they were paid and were ‘not thinking about what [someone] from the NAACP would say when they decided to do the investigation of the sanitation workers.’

At the council meeting, Al invoked NC General Statute 95–98, which banned collective bargaining in 1959, a time in the South when ‘Jim Crow’ racial segregation and discrimination were rampant. Laws like 95–98 were passed in part to keep Black workers disenfranchised. ‘*The Jim Crow law of 95–98 has to come off the books,*’ Al exhorted. Ron, though, was behind the efforts to keep the law on the books. As head of the North Carolina Coalition for Jobs, he said their work to make sure the law did not change mainly involved business and government representatives meeting, in the same conference room where he and I met, to figure out who needed to make what calls to which legislators.

In Ron’s opinion, this ‘*was an inside-the-building kind of an issue to us.*’ They used their inside contacts with state legislators to keep 95–98 intact. Ron said they went around the boardroom and talked about which legislators they each knew in order to speak with them personally and privately. They did not really need to do much media work around this issue, including social media, because most of the work was inside the legislature behind closed doors.

Ron believed they were in complete control of the situation.

You know, it’s typically easier to defend [a law] that’s on the books than it is to try to change one. So the entity that’s trying to change, it’s got ... more of a burden ... because they’re trying to change it ... [and] might have more of an incentive to have an outward-looking strategy than the group that’s trying to maintain.

Ron was arguing that the groups opposing the ban on public-sector collective bargaining should have more of an incentive to use social media since it was an out-group politically (Karpf, 2012).

Still, he did not have any illusions that the issue would disappear. As with other conservatives, Ron believed that public-sector unions were a growth area, meaning that unlike the private sector in which factories could close, the public-sector is here to stay, so his group always needed to be on guard.

But for Ron’s group, being on guard did not mean using social media. While other conservative groups fighting against public-sector unions were very active on the internet – in fact, more on average than their left-leaning counterparts (Schradie, 2019), Ron was misguided – the groups en masse fighting for collective bargaining rights did not have higher digital activism levels.

Ron’s story introduces key aspects of the 3C’s. First, to understand digital unionizing, it is essential to analyze the entire labor landscape, not just traditional trade unions. Ron’s account shows the overlapping nature of context, class, and community but from the perspective of the ‘other’ side – how the North Carolina environment, privileged class political connections, and a community network of elite insiders, all factored into the Coalition’s internet use. Ron’s influential coalition and its low levels of digital engagement also show the limits of only using digital metrics to measure sources and levers of power – or of powerlessness. It was not just that Ron did not believe they needed social media but that it was too public for how they pulled political strings.

Context

Ron's childhood experience of labor organizing, as life and death, is part of the fabric of labor history and its legacy in North Carolina. This violence is rooted in how North Carolina, like many southern states, is based on a slaveholding agricultural and labor system that held people in bondage and poverty for years, particularly Black Americans. That legacy continues today. It is not simply a question of individual identity politics but institutional and structural racism.

Chapel Hill, a college town and home of the state's flagship university – the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill – was built by slaves and other low wage workers, and until recently, campus buildings still revered slaveholders with their names or confederate soldiers with a statute in the center of campus. In fact, the people who perform janitorial services at the university today are still predominantly Black women who are called 'Housekeepers' as a throwback to the term, 'house slave.' They still refer to themselves as Housekeepers, so I use that term, as well.

As a result, public-sector unionizing, digital or otherwise, in Chapel Hill is not as open and easy as activists would like because of the region's historical roots of anti-union and racist politics. Slavery as an institution made collective labor organizing an uphill battle. After the Civil War, labor organizing in the state grew during a progressive window in southern American history, called Reconstruction, when Black lawmakers began to become legally involved in civic life. But the turn of the century brought repressive laws and white supremacist violence. Black workers who spoke up were harassed and sometimes lynched.

Nonetheless, in the wake of the Depression in the 1930s, union organizing spread like wildfire, yet retaliation continued. During one strike, workers were beaten, evicted, and killed (Salmand, 1995). Nonetheless, labor organizing was bolstered by the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which legalized union activity for the first time. Southern states like North Carolina insisted on provisions in the legislation, such as the exclusion of public-sector workers. By the late 1940s, Jim Crow laws fueled racism and limited inter-racial cooperation, including among workers.

In the 1950s, unions faced severe repression during the anti-communist Red Scare. This setback was particularly dominant in North Carolina, where the violence was harsh, especially against organizations of Black workers (Griffin & Korstad, 1995). In 1959, collective bargaining for public employees was completely banned in the state with 95–98 while northern states, like Wisconsin, were expanding labor rights for the public-sector. In North Carolina, even though workers could form or join a union, they were not allowed to negotiate with state, county, or local governments for wages, hours, or other working conditions. Meanwhile, the state had the largest and most powerful Ku Klux Klan, which fueled intimidation tactics against Black and white workers coming together to unionize (Cunningham, 2013).

Despite some North Carolina union victories in the 1960s and 1970s, the state's unionization efforts plunged in-step with the national decline. In 1979, five North Carolina anti-racist labor organizers were gunned down by the Klan during a protest in what was called the Greensboro Massacre (Cunningham et al., 2010). Few activist unions were left in North Carolina by the late 1980s as union density rates dropped nationwide in all sectors (Rosenfeld, 2014).

But by the early 2000s, an emerging multi-racial organizing campaign had emerged despite dismal working conditions. The United Nations sent a team to the state and ruled that because of the collective bargaining ban, the state was violating international law. One public worker explained that they just wanted ‘*Basic human rights. We’re not asking for a million dollars; we’re asking to be treated with dignity and respect ... we just want to be given what’s right and duly ours.*’

Unions have been viewed in North Carolina as northern outside agitators, a spillover from the Civil War. Respondents often described unions as ‘other.’ One commented, ‘*The stuff that’s getting put into everybody’s head is the unions can’t do nothin’*’, unions are Jimmy Hoffa and corruption ... [but] if workers weren’t getting screwed then they wouldn’t be looking for a union.’

Fear from those in authority was common for workers trying to organize unions in North Carolina. This fear was about more than losing one’s job. It was also a fear of violence. Some UNC-Chapel Hill Housekeepers, organizing since the mid-1990s, have been very public in voicing their concerns of abuse, speaking on-camera for the news and in a documentary film in the 1990s. Yet it was still difficult for many workers to speak up. In response, university students began working in coalition with the housekeepers to document testimonies of their working conditions. Stories abounded of sexual harassment, racist treatment, and feeling like slaves. One student told me,

Many of the folks who wrote these statements were not able or willing to read them in public because there’s still a very intense culture of fear ... So folks aren’t willing to come in front of a room of even their allies to explain what’s going on, but as students ... who can’t be fired for speaking out, we are able to come in and honestly speak their stories.

Labor, student, and community organizers responded by figuring out the safest way to communicate with workers – and to illicit communication from them, which often was in-person meetings, flyers, and phone calls – ways that workers could easily access and trust. Online traces were barely visible, as the possibilities for organizing via the internet could not overcome this worker fear of employer surveillance, embedded in the decades of repression for speaking out. If students or anyone mediated their voice – online or otherwise – it simply defeated the ideals of the direct many-to-many feature of the internet. These institutional constraints limited many individuals’ use of the internet.

Class

It wasn’t just fear that made it difficult. The next key overlapping factor for digital unionizing is social class. Despite the Chapel Hill city workers filing their lawsuit against their firing, they did not take to social media. While the lack of trust constrains posting to public platforms, this online limitation is not just based on the region’s history but also on a system of racialized class power that can inhibit speaking up (Gaventa, 1980; Scott, 1990).

This fear was part of broader institutionalized and classed digital inequalities. For instance, both the union representing the housekeepers and the student activist organization were explicitly participatory in their practices and ideals, so when the university asked for feedback on a statewide law that would affect university public workers, activists observed the process carefully. One activist explained how only a handful of

employees, especially in housekeeping, responded to the cryptic e-mail the university had sent out soliciting input.

That's 29 out of potentially 22,000 who would be impacted by this legislation ... if you were doing research and you got .001 percent participation, would you consider that statistically significant? You wouldn't. You would never use that data. So the fact that this is the data being used to say we incorporated [Air quotes] 'worker voices' ... there's a serious problem there.

Workers told me they felt intimidated to have their opinion documented – one that many worried could later get them fired. An activist added: 'It's just another example of leaders who are out of touch with the realities that workers face at the university.' And being 'in touch' with workers' opinions was paramount to their movement. But the internet was rarely the best way to connect in that way because of these racialized class power differences that operated online. This fear factor in constraining digital unionizing point to how class mechanisms are not simply economic or educational but based on power differences, often rooted in racist occupational structures (Schradie, 2020).

Basic digital inequality constraints were also at play as socioeconomic factors were key challenges not only for individual workers in the form of limited access and skills, for instance, but also for some of the pro-union organizations themselves who also lacked the digital labor and tools necessary to engage in consistent digital unionizing. These classed-based limitations were key dynamics for this digital activism gap.

Community

A third inter-related process with digital unionizing is the role of institutions. The union, for instance, was critical to levels and practices of digital unionizing but so were related organizations and coalitions.

The network of groups fighting for public-sector rights in Chapel Hill had connections from both new and old coalition-building – but this organizing was often more physical than digital. Rather than the outgroup always engaging in more digital engagement, as Ron had pointed out, it largely depended on whether the broader network of groups already had a digital strategy or not. Ron's group did not need to engage much online because they wanted to privately lobby but there were also sister conservative organizations who were active online. This was not the case for the Chapel Hill labor rights groups. They had some allies with higher levels of digital engagement, but it was not as integrated. However, anti-labor conservative institutions in the United States, recognizing the power and potential of public-sector workers' unions, have orchestrated efforts to dismantle them state by state (McCartin, 2008). Conservative think tanks and media outlets re-circulated public-sector union attacks, which showed up on social media. Therefore, the community factor matters for those fighting against labor rights just as much as those organizing for them.

At the same time, one online-intense network that did have an affiliation with public-sector workers in Chapel Hill was the local Occupy Wall Street movement, whose encampment was at the main Post Office, across the street from campus. When these activists decided to occupy an abandoned car dealership as a statement against

gentrification and homelessness in 2011, Chapel Hill police came in with assault weapons to arrest the squatters. This was a tipping point for the liberal town. A large and lively protest march wound its way down the wide boulevard heading toward the Chapel Hill Town Hall, where a town council meeting was in session. As I spoke to some public-sector union activists, they confided in me that they felt like they ‘had’ to be there because in such an oppressed area, the left needed to stick together, but they disapproved of the mostly young white Occupy activists’ tactics.

A handful of the Occupy Chapel Hill protesters were also involved in the student group, UNC-SAW, which supported the housekeepers and other workers at UNC. Yet the intense digital engagement of the Occupy movement did not always trickle down to the public worker struggle. In fact, UNC-SAW, while generally having higher digital engagement levels than their union counterparts, did not use the internet as much as the similarly educated groups who opposed union rights (Schradié, 2019).

On the one hand, then, their networks were strong, bringing out people en masse when necessary. On the other hand, public-sector worker organizing in Chapel Hill was not centered on social media. How do these ties, albeit loose, of a strong social media activist movement interact with the lower public-sector union engagement levels?

These community network effects derive from a historical context. As union density rapidly decreased during the 1980s, some rank-and-file union activists in North Carolina were publicly critical of international unions for not putting more effort into ‘organizing the unorganized.’ They saw ‘Organizing the South’ as a key political strategy because of the extreme repression of Black Americans, particularly workers, in the South.

In 1996, BWFJ saw public workers as an important sector to organize because some of the lowest paid and most mistreated workers were public employees, particularly service workers, such as the UNC Housekeepers. They eventually affiliated with an international union to gain access to its resources and to align with its social movement unionism. Together, they became part of a statewide effort to overturn the collective bargaining ban, alongside other unions, as well as with student, faculty, and civil rights groups. But why couldn’t these ties – with other digitally-engaged unions or Occupy Chapel Hill – spill over? In addition to the class and context constraints, these labor groups believed and practiced off-line face-to-face organizing as key not only to organizing but also community coalition-building. More importantly, because digital engagement was not a large part the core public workers’ rights groups, this had a ripple effect on other organizations and worker members who were then not motivated to overcome the other class and context constraints. In other words, Occupy activists encountered digital technology in very different circumstances than most of the labor activists, despite being in the same political umbrella.

Nonetheless, even within the UNC campus unionization efforts, one organizer told me they had different ways to reach different types of activists. They took social media seriously but only for people with whom it was effective. For students, a listserv and Facebook were key online strategies. For faculty supporters it was email, but for housekeepers, printed flyers and texting were ideal, as well as in-person communication. At public community meetings, leaders would list on a whiteboard a multitude of ways to communicate with each other, the public, and the Board-of-Governors – both online and offline. These included Twitter hashtags, but the actual use of them was negligible. Key organizers repeatedly mentioned how their campaigns were most successful when they integrated multiple communication channels that considered social class digital inequalities, the

southern anti-labor context, and the diverse community coalitions they had built. In other words, various digital technologies worked best, albeit at low levels, when they were socially situated.

Discussion

Studies of digital unionizing would benefit from examining context, class, and community. Public-sector workers in this American southern town had pockets of organizing campaigns over the past decade but with the barest minimum of digital use, especially in comparison to other digitally visible movements of the time, such as in Wisconsin.

On the surface, Chapel Hill, North Carolina and Madison, Wisconsin have many similarities – both are liberal college towns with the state’s top university, but one had dramatically more digital use (Madison) than the other (Chapel Hill). Wisconsin’s political crisis could have made a difference, so this ‘political opportunity’ (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004) could be interpreted as part of the broader context. This is a well-theorized concept in both social movement studies and political sociology, but context is more than which political party is in office or what bill has been introduced. It is a deeper historical and networked community milieu, so it is essential to go beyond ephemeral hashtag activism. While these 3Cs, then, could be useful for any study of working-class struggles, digital or not, with the increasing use of online-only research, the 3C’s become even more vital.

As a result, it is important to understand who the actors are and what these conflicts were *before* the internet or any digital campaign to understand any use of digital technology. If I were to give an ahistorical, decontextualized account of a movement in which the only social movement protagonists who exist are those who use the internet, these movements’ history would thus begin with the internet. If possible, we must understand the dynamics of the conflict before a new platform is in play to recognize how it is affected by the ‘treatment’ of the internet. If we decontextualize and wash over this history, it is difficult to understand variation in digital use.

As a result, we need historical and ethnographic accounts along with the quantified data. What drives internet use is not from spontaneous groups emerging out of nowhere. Instead, it is a new tool often adopted in old struggles, struggles that sometimes embrace digital technology at high rates and sometimes do not. We need to look at the relationship that these groups have to each other, not just as individual groups or members. Workers have had a difficult time organizing in the South for a variety of reasons – why would we think the internet could solve that?

Still, is the context simply that unions themselves are old-fashioned and stuck in the past? Perhaps it is also a question of members’ age. Certainly, the student activists in this case used the internet more than many other worker organizations, yet even the student group had relatively low social media use, compared to the older Tea Party activists who opposed union rights. Instead, the way in which old versus new comes into play is more about the historical context that shapes the current struggles of workers. There were some ways in which older forms of digital communication – e-mail listservs, for instance – were used more than social media platforms, but part of this explanation is that these were deemed more trustworthy than more public forms, which aligns with the fear factor.

While a bystander who has never been involved in activism may decide to participate in a growing public protest movement and Tweet about it, workers participating in

unionization efforts and any subsequent social media is a less transient process. As with any unionization effort, digitally-enabled or not, the threat of losing one's job is paramount, especially in states or countries with weak labor laws. Viewing context as both wide and deep helps to see how what happened in Chapel Hill could be applied to contexts outside of the Global North, where organizing unions is also faced with repression. The 3C's could be particularly relevant to areas far from big city tech or protest hubs.

One may have expected the social movement unionism of the Chapel Hill campaign to embrace the internet, but this was not the case. It is not that digital technology can never be a part of these types of movements but that they will not necessarily be critical. Simply, the digital era is neither destroying workers' ability to unionize – nor is it the savior for them. Technology may offer opportunities but they also offer challenges that depend on local yet patterned circumstances. In this case, while social media can encourage many-to-many communication through its architecture, Black Housekeepers were discouraged from using the broadcast features of social media due to racialized institutional surveillance and the economic precarity of low wage public-sector workers in the rural South. Some technologies may be new, but alienation and oppression are not – and neither is organizing.

As a result, digital unionizing analyses, or even union activism in general, requires a full understanding of the broader *context* for organizing. In this case, a racist legacy of slavery reinforced low digital use and even *community* networks were key limitations for the viability of digital unionizing. While the expected digital divide challenges, such as resources, are a part of this digital activism gap equation, there are other overlapping other *class* components as to why the internet was not used more in this protracted organizing campaign. Not only do these three factors overlap with each other, but in this case an intersecting and critical component of all three is a racialized power dynamic. As Davis (2020) points out, power and inequality are crucial theoretical frameworks to understanding the use of technologies in everyday life.

Rather than pronounce digital unionizing in stark positive or negative terms with these three considerations, a nuanced lens can be more fruitful. What we see with a hashtag has multiple layers that cannot be summed up in a handful of characters. Visible viral posts stories are limited in being able to more deeply understand the digitalization of collective action. Examining workers who are online infrequently is also essential. Digital analyses, increasingly focused on online hashtags rather than offline contexts, need to capture the challenges that workers face in organizing in the digital era. These more robust methods can then sharpen our theories.

Therefore, the 3C's can reconcile the individualized digital activism literature that presumes unions are too old-school in the digital realm because they are too bureaucratic or the social movement or labor studies institutionalized union literature that often suggests that these types of movements are democratic and would embrace the internet. One might have also expected that the social movement democratically oriented movements in a highly educated town in the Global North would have high levels of digital engagement. But this case shows that rather than 'networked individualism,' *networked institutionalism* might be a more apt description of digital unionizing.

A contextual, class, and community lens could be applied to other situations. A comparative approach of different digital platforms, software, hardware and other devices and services could yield more nuanced findings. Also, the offline and online data from

which I mostly draw is based on public-sector organizing, rather than platform work or other types of labor mobilization, yet the implications may be relevant for all types of workers in this transformative digital era. Finally, while the case I use in this ethnographic approach is in the United States, this case may have commonalities with the challenges that many workers face, such as poverty wages and oppressive working conditions, and those challenges can be incorporated into any digital analysis.

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