Chapter XXII
What are the Main Impacts of Internet and Information and Communication Technology on Unions and Trade Unionism? An Exploratory Research in Europe and North America

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ABSTRACT

There has been a lot of research on the impact of Internet and information and communication technologies (ICT) on society and on private, public or non-profit organizations. In comparison, there has been far less research specifically dealing with the impact of Internet and ICT on unions and on trade unionism whether in North America or Europe. Moreover trade unionism is a field in which, international comparisons between European countries as well as between Europe and North America are difficult to carry out. The historical background, dialogue and opposition traditions between unions and companies, cultural, institutional and economic contexts, government policies are so many factors that make these comparisons difficult. This research aims to answer two main questions. Is it possible, despite local context differences, to identify main trends and international convergences when analyzing the impact of ICT on unions and trade unionism? And if these major trends do exist, what challenges, opportunities and threats do they pose to trade unions in industrialized countries? This exploratory research, first led to the construction of an analysis grid that presented three main research interests:

- It made it possible to compare ICT impacts on trade unions and unionism in European countries and North America in spite of their differences of context;
What are the Main Impacts of Internet and ICT on Unions and Trade Unionism?

- It helped to identify all the different types of ICT impacts whether they were direct (transformation of the unions themselves, transformations in union practices) or indirect (consequences for unions of the transformations of work and in the behavior of employees);
- It led to identify main international trends concerning the impacts of ICT on unions and unionism in industrialized countries.

In a second step, this research shows that ICT poses threats but also offers opportunities for unions and trade unionism. The tensions between opportunities and threats led to the identification of four main types of challenges posed by ICT for unions in the industrialized world today.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a lot of research on the impact of Internet and information and communication technologies (ICT) on society and on private, public or non-profit organizations. In comparison, there has been far less research specifically dealing with the impact of ICT on unions and on trade unionism whether in North America or Europe. International comparisons on the subject are even scarcer. Indeed, trade unionism is a field in which, international comparisons between European countries as well as between Europe and North America are difficult to carry out. The historical background, dialogue and opposition traditions between unions and companies, cultural, institutional and economic contexts, government policies are so many factors that make these comparisons difficult (Hyman, 2001). This research aims to answer two main questions. Is it possible, despite local context differences, to identify main trends and international convergences when analyzing the impact of ICT on unions and trade unionism? And if these major trends do exist, what challenges, opportunities and threats do they pose to trade unions in industrialized countries?

Considering the scarcity and heterogeneity of research on the subject, this research is an exploratory qualitative study. Several stages were necessary to identify international trends. Firstly, an analysis grid was constructed to so that it was possible to make a transnational comparison of the different types of impact ICT has had on unions whether they were direct (transformation of the unions themselves, transformations in union practices) or indirect (consequences for unions of the transformations of work and in the behavior of employees). This grid reveals four analysis angles which are developed in this paper. This grid also makes it possible to reveal the main challenges that ICT poses for unions and shows that there is indeed a convergence of these challenges in industrialized countries.

In a first part, the methodology and the theoretical framework of this research will be presented. The four analysis angles will be developed in the following four parts. The limitations and lessons to be drawn from this research will be identified in the conclusion.

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN ANALYTICAL GRID ALLOWING INTERNATIONAL AND CROSS CONTINENTAL COMPARISONS ON THE THEME OF UNIONS

A qualitative exploratory approach has been chosen to tackle this problem. Indeed, there are few studies on the impact of ICT on unions and trade unionism. Canadian and American articles are the most numerous on the subject, but their number remains relatively limited. They are still rare in Europe. Moreover these different approaches