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Networked Unionism: Reframing the Labour Movement and Starbucks Workers' Hybrid Organising Practices

Gino Canella

Emerson College, Boston, Massachusetts, USA,
gino_canella@emerson.edu, http://www.ginocanella.com/

Abstract: Union organising is surging in the United States, especially among younger workers in the service industries. This article examines this uptick in labour organising through a case study of Starbucks Workers United (SBWU). I studied this campaign from March to December 2022 using a variety of online and offline methods: conducting twenty-three in-depth interviews with SBWU organisers; attending strikes, direct actions, and planning meetings; and following these groups on social media. This study addresses two main questions: How are SBWU organisers communicating unionisation with their co-workers and to broader publics? And, how are social media influencing workers' organising practices? Despite claims that social media are "a great radicaliser", this study demonstrates how workers were politicised by their material conditions in an industrialising workplace. While media helped organisers amplify their messages and recruit new members, the social relationships among organisers were central to SBWU's early growth. By detailing how organisers navigated the contradictions within networked media, this study shows how worker-led campaigns like SBWU are reshaping the structure and composition of the US labour movement.

Keywords: unions, labour movement, organising, social media, framing, networks, Starbucks

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1. Introduction

Technology has altered the relationship between capital and labour throughout history (Zuboff 1988). In the early 19th century, for instance, British textile workers known as the Luddites destroyed machinery that they viewed as a threat to their trade (Jones 2006). While these dramatic tactics captured the public's attention and persist in the popular imagination, these uprisings must be understood in relation to rising discontent among workers due to dangerous factory conditions, food shortages, war, and rising inflation (Binfield 2004; Thomis 1970). In the 21st century, technologies continue to dramatically alter labour relations: from app-based gig work to productivity trackers that monitor workers' keystrokes, technologies are creating more fragmented and harried conditions for millions of workers around the world (De Stefano 2016; Paret 2015; Pötzsch and Schamberger 2022).

To interrogate the tensions between technology and labour, this article provides a case study of Starbucks Workers United (SBWU). I detail how Starbucks workers are using media and technology to organise union campaigns and develop networks of support. I studied this movement from March to December 2022 by conducting twenty-three in-depth interviews with SBWU organisers; attending strikes, direct actions, and planning meetings; and following these groups on social media. Examining organisers' online and offline practices revealed how workers are using online tools to complement

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traditional community organising tactics, such as strikes, public meetings, and canvassing (Barassi 2013; Underberg and Zorn 2013). The study addresses two main questions: How are SBWU organisers communicating unionisation with their co-workers and the public? And, how are social media influencing workers' campaigns and organising practices?

A lot has been written in the past two decades about media, politics, and social movements (Tufecki 2017; Wolfson 2014). While early scholarship championed social media's revolutionary potential and democratic promise (Jenkins 2006), more critical analyses have interrogated these platforms' surveillance mechanisms, monopoly power, and algorithmic logics (Dean 2009a; Fuchs 2012; Zuboff 2019). Despite the ways in which social media firms harvest users' personal data and use their monopoly power to restrict online communications, techno-utopian arguments persist. Regarding the ongoing unionisation efforts in the US, the *Washington Post* recently claimed that technology is "powering the picket line" (Abril 2021). Similarly, *The Guardian* dubbed this surge in labour activism "Strike 2.0" (Shenker 2019). These authors, and those that share their optimism about digital media, make two broad claims: first, social media help users realise their subjectivity and exert their agency; and second, social media provide organisers with a platform on which to publicise their campaigns to global audiences, thus enhancing their campaign's visibility and expanding the movement's pool of supporters. I complicate these claims by showing how, rather than social media being a "great radicalizer" (Tufecki 2018), Starbucks organisers were politicised by their material conditions and their lived experiences in an industrialising workplace. Following this process of politicisation, Starbucks workers used media to communicate their discontent, which affirmed workers' belief in their collective power.

As Downing (2001) argued, radical alternative media – such as street art, community radio, and video – should not be viewed simply as cultural products. Rather, they are social practices that reveal the everyday practices of democracy. Downing (2008) theorised radical media as "complex sociotechnical institutions" (ix), proposing a holistic framework that foregrounds the social aspects of activists' media practices (Atton 2002). I therefore examine how the social relations among Starbucks workers informed their communication and media practices and fostered their working-class subjectivity (Wolfson and Funke 2014).

The next section provides background on Starbucks Workers United to situate this campaign within the broader US labour movement. I also detail the methods I used to study this campaign. From there, I present the study's findings in three thematic sections: the politicisation of Starbucks workers; networked labour and affirmative communication; and the reframing of unions and "progressive" corporations. Finally, I conclude with reflections on workers' hybrid organising practices and networked unionism. I argue that although distributed movements provide organisers with tactical flexibility and allow for message diversity, they often lack the institutional resources needed to wage long-term fights.

2. Starbucks Workers United

The push to unionise Starbucks began on August 23, 2021, when baristas in Buffalo, New York, posted a letter on Twitter addressed to then-Starbucks President and CEO Kevin Johnson. The letter did not specify workers' demands; rather, it announced that workers had formed an organising committee, stating: "there can be no true partnership without power-sharing and accountability".[1] After months of organising,

[1] https://twitter.com/SBWorkersUnited/status/1429843732715692040

Starbucks workers in Buffalo became the first store to unionise – voting 19-8 in favour of the union on December 9, 2021. The vote is part of a broader effort among service and retail workers in the US seeking union representation. In the past year, workers at Amazon, Trader Joe's, Apple, and numerous independently-owned businesses have voted to unionise or have expressed interest in doing so. The National Labor Relations Board (2022) reported that union petitions were up 58 per cent in the first nine months of Fiscal Year 2022. These filings are happening as unions' favourability ratings are at their highest point in decades. A 2021 Gallup survey reported that 68% of people approve of unions, their highest mark since 1965 (Brenan 2021).

Despite unions' popularity and workers' desire to organise their workplaces, the overall state of the US labour movement remains somewhat bleak. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022), union membership in 2021 was 10.3 per cent among all workers – a drop of nearly 10 percentage points from 1983 when 17.7 million workers were unionised.[2] Several factors have contributed to US labour's precipitous decline: among other issues, automation, the outsourcing of manufacturing, "right-to-work" laws in Southern US states, increasingly casualised working arrangements (i.e. "gig" and contract work), and a series of legal decisions that have significantly reduced unions' political influence and financial strength (Aronowitz 2014).

The US labour movement is comprised of many unions and umbrella organisations, and these groups often collaborate and share resources. Starbucks Workers United (SBWU) is supported by Workers United, an affiliate of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). SEIU represents nearly two million members in the US and Canada, primarily in healthcare and janitorial services. SEIU was instrumental in launching the fight for $15 in 2012, a campaign that saw hundreds of fast food workers walk off the job demanding a $15 per hour minimum wage and union representation. Workers United represents more than 86,000 workers in the textile, food service, and non-profit industries in the US and Canada. Its history illustrates the various approaches to labour organising.[3] One of its predecessor unions, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, for example, was created in 1914 after workers rejected the American Federation of Labor's conservative approach to workplace bargaining, often called "business unionism" (Taft 1963), in favour of rank-and-file organising. Workers United continues this tradition by practising what it calls "social unionism", advocating for immigrant workers and lobbying for progressive policies. This history informs both the structure of and communication strategies used by Starbucks Workers United.

SBWU is a worker-led grassroots movement. Since the Buffalo store authorised the first union, baristas at more than 270 stores across the US have voted to form a union. These campaigns have been led by semi-autonomous organising committees consisting of workers at those stores. Workers United provides organisers with resources, including legal support and training materials. This approach has been key to SBWU's early success, organisers told me. "This is entirely a worker-led movement at this point", Tori Tambellini, a former barista in Pittsburgh who was fired by Starbucks, said. Tambellini, who now organises with Workers United as an intern, told me the worker-to-worker model has insulated SBWU against anti-union talking points – particularly ones that depict the union as a "third party". Kuzco Gong, a barista in West Hartford, Connecticut, said organisers emphasised to workers a commitment to the "democratic process", explaining that a union would only form if a majority of workers

[2] The public-sector unionisation rate is 33.9%; the private-sector unionisation rate is 6.1%.
[3] https://workersunited.org/who-we-ar/our-history

in the store voted yes. “[We were] going to make the decision, not a union coming in and imposing themselves onto us”, Gong said. By using a decentralised network of local committees that are linked to a national organisation, SBWU created “geographical propagation” (Pasquier et al. 2020: 12). This meant baristas could focus on the local concerns of workers during organising conversations, while also relying on Workers United’s legal support and administrative resources as needed (Geelan 2022).

To understand how a dispersed yet interconnected network of union organisers communicated, I used a variety of online and offline methods to study this campaign. I began by observing SBWU’s social media activity, paying particular attention to how organisers framed the campaign’s messages. Because I did not want to rely solely on social media posts, I then emailed SBWU and requested to speak with organisers about their communication and media strategies. An organiser replied to my initial request and made an email introduction between me and baristas in Boston, which is where I live; I then had several conversations with Boston-area organisers to explain my intentions with the study. I have attended strikes, direct actions, press conferences, and planning meetings hosted by Boston SBWU organisers, and I spoke with baristas and community allies at these events. To expand the study beyond Boston, I identified SBWU organisers on social media and contacted them via email and direct message. I used my observations from social media to formulate my interview questions, asking organisers what motivated their union campaigns and how social media played a role in their organising. I interviewed workers with a wide range of experience at Starbucks: some baristas have only worked at Starbucks for six months, while others have been with the company for 15 years. Interviewees ranged in age from 19 to 45, with an average age of 26. I spoke with organisers from 17 US states to understand how workers are communicating across geographic distances. The workers I interviewed have been organising and agitating for unionisation very publicly by posting on social media, marching in the streets, and appearing in news reports. Despite the risk of losing their jobs, all interviewees except for one agreed to be identified by name. Although qualitative research is not generalisable, nonprobability samples of in-depth interviews can help researchers “identify theoretically significant ideas” and understand “what ‘goes on’ in a particular population” (Barnes 2016: 21). I attempted to understand what is “going on” with SBWU by studying its communication and media strategies. The case reveals how movement cultures network across space and time, and it illuminates the tensions between technology and labour.

3. Politicising Workers: Industrialisation and Changing Workplace Culture

Media effects is an intellectual tradition that continues to have a profound influence on communication research. From violent video games resulting in more violent societies to television news reports that foster “mean world syndrome” among viewers (Gerbner and Gross 1976), these studies suggest a unidirectional flow of information that rarely considers peoples’ agency. Media effects has been used often to study social media. For example, researchers have argued that social media promote political and civic participation (Boulianne 2015). These studies, however, often ignore how algorithms filter content based on users’ personal preferences, creating information silos. Further, the economic incentives within social media prioritise outrage and spectacle, heightening political polarisation and creating more fractured and uninformed publics (Kubin and von Sikorski 2021; Wang et al. 2019).

While concerns about the pernicious effects of social media are valid, they must be understood in relation to the material conditions in which people live – and how those

conditions shape peoples' views of themselves and their positions in society. Marx (1992) argued that subjectivity is a historical process in which people perceive and directly engage with the world. In contrast to media effects – which implies a passive process in which people absorb content and act accordingly – a historical materialist approach argues that peoples' agency is constrained by the structures of informational capitalism (Fromm 2004; Fuchs 2009). This understanding is applied to SBWU and, more broadly, to ongoing labour organising in the US, because as Nelson (2011) wrote in his analysis of Marx and empirical subjectivity:

> "Labour is the very substance which transforms both object and subject in the process of production […] Labour is thus not only the manifestation of subjective powers, it is the practical condition which facilitates the subject's experience of itself in an external material field" (406).

Starbucks workers' practical conditions at work and within the various crises of contemporary capitalism compelled them to join SBWU. Workers repeatedly cited the deteriorating conditions in their stores when asked why they decided to pursue a union. Equipment malfunctions are frequent, workers said, which creates safety concerns and makes it difficult for them to keep up with orders. In addition, workers noted how Starbucks' workplace culture has changed – from "chill coffee shop vibes", as barista Dani Glover said, to "almost industrialised", according to Tara Dupree, a barista in Vermont who has worked at Starbucks for four years. Glover, who began working at Starbucks in 2007, said baristas at her store in Austin, Texas, are under increasing pressure to meet sales targets set by the company. This process of industrialisation has been exacerbated by technology. "I mean, honestly, some days, it's just absolutely chaos", Glover said. "There are hundreds of mobile orders coming in… We'll do, like, 80 to 90 transactions in a 30-minute time span, where we're making 200 items. Labour is a big issue, cutting labour". Many baristas said they applied to work at Starbucks because the company brands itself as a "third place", a safe and relaxing environment between work and home. As the coffee chain has become "more like fast food," as one barista put it, workers described feeling alienated from their labour.

These concerns were magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic. "COVID changed the game", William Suarez, a barista in Florida, told me. "COVID showed the world that we don't have to take these jobs the way that they are. COVID showed that we have so much more to live for", he said. "We deserve leisure, we deserve higher pay". The discourse around "essential workers" highlighted for workers their role in the current economy. Jacob Lawson, a barista in Utah, said, "One of the benefits was they called us 'heroes'. We were all heroes just for being frontline, essential workers, food workers, your gas station workers or clerks, just anyone who's working, they were culturally trying to appreciate regular workers more". Several months into the pandemic, however, in summer 2020, Starbucks revoked the "catastrophe pay" it began offering baristas at the beginning of the pandemic (an additional $3 per hour, plus a food and beverage credit). This garnered a tremendous amount of frustration and resentment among workers, especially as they saw corporate profits and executive pay rising. "There's just, like, general unrest among the working class", Thomas Estling, a barista in Oregon, said. "There was all this rhetoric about essential workers, and these people were being told that they were essential while being abused and exploited very, very heavily. And I think that people are very conscious of what's happening to them, and they're trying to find ways to change that".

This sense of alienation is partly a generational phenomenon. Oliver Nichols, a 22-year-old barista in Tennessee, said there is a sense of dissatisfaction among his Gen Z peers – due to a lack of affordable housing, student debt, climate change, and limited employment prospects. “I think people are just ready to fight for their rights, whether that’s union or non-union”, he said. “I think my generation, we just grew up in a time of protests, so a lot of us, that’s just our energy”. Cipher Sinclair, a 19-year-old barista in Tennessee, expressed a similar sentiment. “In my age range, it comes from genuine anger towards the government and the system, and it comes from our own experiences with prejudice and being treated like dogshit and being stepped over for all of our working years”.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Starbucks workers have also seen a shift in customer behaviour. Several baristas said they regularly experience hostility and condescension from customers – a shared experience among airline workers, food service workers, and delivery drivers. “It’s pretty dehumanising to feel that you’re less than the person paying for a service, just because you’re being paid to give them that service”, Kat Hudgins, a barista in Oklahoma City, said. Natalie Mann, a barista in South Carolina, who is on the organising committee at her store, explained how broken equipment and pressure from management have created unsafe work environments. For instance, her store’s drive-thru system malfunctioned one morning, causing a backup of orders and long wait times. “It was a nightmare”, Mann said. “We had customers cussing at us. And then we had one of our strongest partners basically break down and run and cry”.

All of these factors primed workers to be receptive to unionisation. From unsafe and hostile work environments – intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic – to a changing corporate culture in which productivity metrics guide operations, baristas developed their working-class subjectivity. Organisers highlighted their personal experiences as exploited workers when they began communicating unionisation with their colleagues and broader publics. Prior to turning to social media, organisers leveraged the strong ties within their existing social networks.

4. Networked Unionism: Earned Trust and Affirmative Communication

Numerous scholars have studied how unions have utilised social media and digital technologies (Schradie 2015; Upchurch and Grassman 2015; Wood 2015). Although trade unions have used newsletters, film, and radio for generations to organise workers, shape public opinion, and conduct union education (Taylor 2010), digital media are presenting organisers with new opportunities and challenges (Geelan 2021). For instance, Dencik and Wilkin (2020) argued that networked media have created new organisational forms within the labour movement and have altered the political culture of unions. Specifically, these tools magnify a long-standing tension within the labour movement: the reformist versus revolutionary approaches to union organising. While digital networks disrupt trade unions’ hierarchical structures and one-way communication strategies, suggesting their revolutionary character, these venues often over-emphasise personalities and symbolic power at the expense of worker/community partnerships. Research on how gig workers used digital media to organise revealed another contradiction within digital media: while the internet helped them connect and collaborate, these connections were often fragmented by geographic location and by industry (Wood et al. 2018). SBWU navigated these tensions by syncing its online and offline practices and using media to foster meaningful participation among workers and communities.

Networked unionism emphasises two aspects of union organising: the network of social relations among labour movement participants, and how these relations are expressed across digital and physical spaces. Castells (2010) focused primarily on the second aspect of this framework: the expression. He argued that participatory online communication, which relies on user-generated content, promotes "mass self-communication". He argued that although these sites provide venues for people to express themselves – giving voice to communities that have traditionally been excluded from public discourses – they are problematic for movement building. Dean (2009b) argued that mass self-communication is based on a cult of personality that eschews collective subjectivity in favour of personal branding and self-promotion. Likewise, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) wrote that contemporary movements that rely heavily on digital media, such as Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street, and the Arab Spring uprisings, craft personal action frames based on individual members' stories. Although this creates "digitally enabled action networks", it fails to realise "the familiar logic of collective action" (742).

Though personalised messages distributed on social media have the potential to reach global audiences and mobilise allies quickly to an action, Bennett and Segerberg concluded that media do not alter "the fundamental principles of organizing collectives" (748). These fundamental principles, as this case demonstrates, are the social and material relationships among workers. These relationships have helped SBWU communicate and strategise with empathy and authority.

Because SBWU lacks large financial and institutional resources, it relies primarily on baristas' existing social networks – networks that have been formed over time through face-to-face communication on the job. Many baristas told me that Starbucks stores are fairly "close knit", with workers developing intimate friendships with their colleagues and even meeting their romantic partners at work. Meghin Martin, a barista in Richmond, Virginia, said that prior to launching a social media campaign, workers "created one-on-one relationships with everybody in the store". Kuzco Gong said the organising campaign at their Connecticut store "was built on the trust that we have in the partners that we've been working with for a decent amount of time, and in our relationships"[4]. Dani Glover, the 15-year Starbucks veteran in Austin, Texas, echoed the importance of in-store and community relationships. "I mean, for me, it's mostly about community. I live in the neighbourhood that I work in. I see my neighbours walking past me, or I see customers walking past my house all the time. […] So yeah, it's just community. I love my co-workers".

The social bonds that baristas have with their customers and co-workers laid the foundation upon which SBWU organised. At a Boston SBWU planning meeting that I attended via Zoom, organisers discussed how to strengthen these bonds at upcoming labour actions in the area. They wrote a solidarity statement for one action to "show our love and support for all workers demonstrating," one barista said, highlighting how organisers attempted to link disparate workers across industries and geographic locations. Boston SBWU uses social media to publicise its actions, share training resources, and communicate with baristas at other stores. Organisers at this meeting discussed their desire to secure news coverage for a series of May Day rallies across the Boston area. They hoped that this would amplify the campaign to wider audiences. Although movements can be reluctant to rely on news coverage because it often emphasises action rather than context (Jenkins 1983), Boston SBWU regularly e-

[4] Starbucks refers to baristas as "partners." Organisers have critiqued this in their campaigns, arguing that a partnership implies shared decision-making.

mailed press releases to journalists about store elections and strike updates, viewing the news media as an integral part of its distribution strategy.

May Day, or International Workers' Day, commemorates the economic and workplace gains that the labour movement has secured. The date, 1 May, marks the 1886 Haymarket affair when workers in Chicago struck to obtain the eight-hour workday. Following the strike, several workers were killed in a violent clash with police. On 1 May 2022, Boston SBWU observed and celebrated this day by partnering with independent coffee shop workers, activist groups, and Massachusetts labour unions and staging rallies across the region (Figure 1). I attended a demonstration in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Tyler Daguerre, an organiser with Boston SBWU, spoke to the crowd of about 100 people in Cambridge Common. "We want to recognise how International Workers' Day unites workers around the globe", he said. "Howard Schultz [Starbucks Chief Executive Officer] and Amazon are facing a resurgent labour movement that is able to fight back and redirect the profits that only labour can create – so we can end poverty, racism, and oppression in all forms. And *that* is why we are here". Another Starbucks barista, addressing the crowd through a bullhorn, stressed the need to build working-class solidarity across industries:

> "If we make changes and organise now, we are the movement that puts an end to this level of grandiose corporate greed. We need to organise together to do that… This is my call to action to you all. We need to be in connection with each other. Those profits grind to a halt when we strike. We have so much more power than you think. Know that. Our organising will make safe working conditions a precedent and a priority".

Figure 1: Boston SBWU joins with labour organisers and activists to commemorate May Day 2022. Photo by Author

Although the May Day actions did not garner much news coverage, Thomas Estling, a barista in Oregon, said SBWU has used social media to "signal boost" messages. He explained that organisers from his store have leaned on their relationships with

socialist politicians and community activists in the region – including the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) – to distribute their campaigns to diverse audiences. “There's more of a community dialogue going on there between members of the community, and the union then is able to create buzz on social media that gets picked up easier”. SBWU has created online buzz in a variety of ways. For example, workers have walked off the job to protest discrimination from managers and posted these interactions on TikTok; organisers have hosted one-day “sip ins”, in which the public is encouraged to visit the store and discuss Starbucks’ unfair labour practices with baristas; and workers at a Boston store held a 64-day strike, the longest strike in Starbucks’ history. SBWU Boston used Twitter throughout the strike for various purposes: to crowdsource donations for its strike fund; to publish barista profiles, putting a face to the workers on the picket line; to post a resolution passed by Boston City Councillor Liz Breadon that demanded that Starbucks stop retaliating against workers; and to share images from stores across the country that were also on strike.[5] The action generated considerable local news coverage, and Boston SBWU used social media to share journalists’ and politicians’ stories with its online supporters (Figure 2).

Figure 2: SBWU Boston garnered local news coverage during its indefinite strike on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston, Massachusetts. Organisers relied on their relationships with community activists, politicians, and local unions to staff the picket line. 18 July 2022. Photo by Author

Sharing their experiences on strike and during organising drives has affirmed workers’ belief in their collective power. Billie Nyx, a former barista in New Orleans, who was fired by Starbucks, said visualising SBWU’s campaigns on social media has given workers the confidence and belief that unionisation is possible, especially in the US South, a region which, due to right-to-work laws and pro-business legislation, has historically not had a strong labour movement. “I think seeing [other stores] do it

[5] See https://twitter.com/BostonSBWU

successfully is what put it in our heads that we could do it successfully. Having a successful union drive in a right-to-work state showed everybody else in the district that they could do it, too". Oliver Nichols, a barista from Tennessee, said that private Facebook groups and Discord channels "connect partners". Social media "has been a fantastic way to get the word across and find resources", he said. "You can talk to other people who are going through the exact same thing, and I can bring you help. Or you can find resources through that – finding out what's going on, what moves Starbucks is making against pro-union stores and pro-union partners", he said.

On 9 December 2022, workers in ten US cities staged a series of public demonstrations to celebrate the one-year anniversary of SBWU's first successful union election and to highlight Starbucks' unfair labour practices. The rallies were organised in partnership with teachers' unions and LGBTQ+ groups. Several weeks prior to the anniversary, I attended a Zoom meeting hosted by a SBWU affiliate, in which organisers discussed the importance of the date and strategised about messaging for the actions. Organisers subsequently e-mailed a "social media toolkit" to all attendees, which included sample tweets, graphics, and flyers. Supporters were encouraged to use the templates in the toolkit to mobilise people to the actions and cohere their messaging around three key issues: the one-year anniversary of the Buffalo vote, workers' resiliency, and Starbucks' union-busting tactics. The coordination of this event (with teachers' unions and community partners) and the communication of it (via social media and at public rallies) reveals two aspects of SBWU's networked unionism: first, it relies on collaborations with groups inside and adjacent to the US labour movement, an effort that links SBWU with Starbucks' customers, unions, and community allies; second, it balances an antagonistic and hopeful framing – highlighting both the structural challenges SBWU has encountered as well as the movement's successes.

Networked unionism examines activists' messages and the social relationships that underlie them. Importantly, it recognises the ways in which opponents challenge movements to undermine and disrupt them (Barnes 2020). Chelsea Cruea, a barista in Cleveland, Ohio, said that while social media has "inspired" workers – particularly after the Buffalo vote, which made unionisation a real possibility –, managing user comments and combatting Starbucks' online messaging can be exhausting. "It just feels sometimes like we have to try a little bit harder, and we have to go on the defence to say, 'Hey, what they're doing is wrong' or, 'Hey, this is misinformation'". One SBWU organiser told me that shortly after she launched her store's Instagram account, she noticed that the store manager was viewing her Stories. She then talked with her co-workers about which messages should be made public (e.g., fundraising, mobilisation, and unfair workplace complaints), and which should be kept private (e.g., strategy and negotiations). This struggle over meaning within networked media is the subject of the next section.

5. Reframing Unions and "Progressive" Corporations

Meaning is constructed online and offline through complex relations of power. Power often correlates with access to material resources. Because grassroots organisers generally lack large institutional resources, how they frame their issues is crucial. Gramsci's (1971) concept of "hegemony" and Castells' (2011) concept of "counterpower" are instructive for analysing how SBWU attempted to claim symbolic power and build the institutional capacities it needed to fight for and secure a union. Exploring meaning-making through hegemony and power de-centres media and technology by viewing meaning-making as a historical material process that is constantly in motion (Couldry 2015).

Analysing SBWU's communicative practices through framing highlights the social and emotional aspects of meaning. Frames, according to Goffman (1974), make certain pieces of information more salient than others, thus clarifying issues for people. Researchers have typically studied framing by examining how journalists construct frames: reviewing the sources journalists rely on or the language they use in their stories. In contrast, Carragee and Roefs (2004) offered the "media hegemony thesis", which argues that frames are not simply storytelling devices, but rather social processes that occur in relation to the political economy of media (215). This approach, they argued, recognises the uneven power structures embedded in the production and dissemination of information.

Examining the struggle over meaning and symbolic power reveals how societies' tensions are represented in, and negotiated through, discourse and culture (Williams 1977). Contests over meaning reveal who has the material resources needed to produce media, contest dominant codes, and offer new visions of society.

Unions are increasingly relying on digital media and networked communications to engage in framing contests (Geelan 2021; Salamon 2022). Kelly (2005) argued that unions' frames should do three things: appeal to notions of social justice and fairness, attribute blame for workers' problems, and propose credible remedies. SBWU has applied these frames to varying degrees, but I detail two frames SBWU has used throughout its campaign: (1) updating the role of unions and (2) critiquing "progressive" corporations. I then examine them in relation to the media hegemony thesis.

Rethinking the role of unions in the contemporary US economy came up repeatedly in my interviews with SBWU organisers. Many baristas said that the stereotype of a union worker in manufacturing and building trades is an outdated caricature (see also Martin 2019). Natalie Mann, a barista in South Carolina, said workers at Starbucks, Amazon, Trader Joe's, and independently-owned cafes are changing "the face of the union". But, she said, "I don't want people to think that unions are just becoming a fad, because they're not. Their brand, their image might be changing, but behind it all, these are work conditions that you wouldn't have thought possible". Billie Adeosun, a barista in Olympia, Washington, also noted how SBWU has changed the labour movement's aesthetics. "We have made labour trendy. We've made unionising trendy and hot and sexy, and I love that", she said. "I, however, and a lot of my comrades understand that this is a much, much, much bigger issue than just Starbucks. This is about ending wealth inequality. This is about giving the working class some power".

SBWU is reframing labour beyond the superficial and aesthetic by connecting its organising to labour's history. Unions formed, baristas told me, to demand safety protections for workers. "Unionisation started in that steel worker, factory type work where a huge topic was injury on the job and health and safety", Morgan Leavy, a barista in Austin, Texas, said. "That's definitely in the service field, one hundred per cent". Evan Sunshine, a barista in Ithaca, New York, reiterated this point. "Even in food service, you have those dangerous situations, you have customers who can be liabilities, you are considering food safety, there are hazards", he said. He described having to clean spilled blood in the bathroom, arguing that a union could advance workplace democracy and give workers a say in the tasks they are assigned. "So, it really makes you think: Why don't we have a say in that? Why don't we have a say in our own safety as workers? I feel like [unions] could apply to any industry". Throughout 2022, SBWU regularly published messages of solidarity on social media. Workers amplified union campaigns and strikes organised by teachers and graduate students, railroad workers, and journalists in the US and abroad – thereby leveraging the network effects of digital media to bridge disparate sectors of the labour movement.

In addition to health and safety issues, baristas argued that a union could shift the public's conception of "skilled" labour. Julia Berkman, a barista in Massachusetts who has worked at Starbucks for 11 years, said people make unfair value judgements about the skills that food service employees have. She views making drinks as a craft that deserves respect. "I want to see those skills valued, because I think they have a tremendous amount of value", she said. Cipher Sinclair, a barista in Tennessee, told me there is a disconnect between the public's perception of food service jobs and the reality. Many people, he said, believe "there's only, like, teens and little kids that do those jobs, and so I can treat them like shit and project my insecurities on them. Service jobs are needed, but since no one wants to listen to us, we have to take the stand for ourselves, or no one will bat an eye towards this industry or towards this labour movement".

Service-providing jobs (for example, in hospitality, health care, and retail) make up a growing proportion of overall jobs in the US economy. And SBWU has partnered with legacy labour unions to shift the narrative about unionisation in the service sector. For example, at the May Day rally in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 103 spoke to the assembly about the need to work across sectors and build a more inclusive labour movement. "It's not just the public sector and trades and big factories that can unionise. It's the service sector that can go store-to-store and organise", she said. "That first contract takes real organisation and democratic structures within the union, and it's so scary. We got your back if you need to strike". Partnering with traditional labour organisations has bolstered SBWU's framing contests in several ways: by lending credibility to its campaign messages; by broadening and strengthening its network of supporters; and by contributing financial resources.

The second framing contest SBWU has engaged in is rejecting Starbucks' image as a "progressive" corporation. Oliver Nichols, a trans man who is on the organising committee at his store in Tennessee, said Starbucks' unfair labour practices have been particularly challenging for transgender baristas. He was drawn to Starbucks because of its purported values of diversity and inclusion, and because the company provides gender-affirming healthcare benefits to workers. When the company cut workers' hours below 20 hours per week – the minimum needed to qualify for the company's health care benefits – Nichols said he felt "kind of ashamed for them". "They are presenting these values, claiming that this is part of their culture. But the moment that you do something that they don't agree with, you don't have the support". Julia Berkman said people who work at Starbucks tend to be fairly progressive, in part, because the company puts forth a "very woke, progressive persona". This image is curated by asking baristas to wear Black Lives Matter t-shirts and hanging pride flags in stores. Berkman said the union campaign has clarified what Starbucks' conception of justice is. "I just couldn't square the proceeds of the company and the paychecks of the CEO with my experience".

William Suarez, a barista in Florida, told me that Starbucks' actions during this campaign have been "really disheartening". "I've always considered myself a very progressive person, you know, and it just feels so weird when I feel like I'm being out virtue-signalled by a billion-dollar corporation". Beto Sanchez, a barista in Memphis, Tennessee, who was fired by Starbucks and now organises stores with Workers United, said he thinks Starbucks' hypocrisy throughout this campaign speaks to a larger frustration that people in the US have with institutional politics. Instead of viewing unions as a "progressive" or leftist project, he told me he organises through universal working-class messaging:

> "I've been failed by the left. I've been failed by the right. I've been failed by every single politician, being a gay Latino in the US, and a poor one at that. I've just been so tired of these two sides of the same coin that have been failing workers everywhere, and that's something that, I guess, can kind of be an equaliser with these things. I've been so annoyed, tired and jaded by [politics] that, honestly, the only things I truly advocate for are workers' rights, for all workers, regardless of what your beliefs are".

Navigating and embracing workers' diverse identities, as Nichols and Sanchez made clear, has material consequences for workers. Union organisers fostered a diverse coalition of workers and community supporters by challenging Starbucks' "progressive" values and demanding on-the-job protections, improved workplace safety, and a voice in store operations. Placing buttons on their aprons or hanging pride flags in their stores, organisers told me, merely gesture towards justice. Baristas said this campaign is not about platitudes, it is about ensuring that all workers are treated with dignity and respect.

6. Conclusion

De-centering media disrupts popular myths about the emancipatory power of digital technologies, and it illuminates the tensions between technology, labour, and society (Couldry 2015). Throughout history, technologies have drastically altered the nature of work, education, and politics. If their implementation is not taken seriously, emerging technologies can exacerbate existing inequalities and create social and political dislocation. This study conceded these points and offered a holistic account of Starbucks Workers United's organising practices – focusing on workers' communication strategies and media tactics. Starbucks workers were politicised through their lived experiences and material conditions on the job, which made them receptive to unionisation. Workers then utilised social media to share their discontent and broadcast affirmative messages of solidarity. These tactics helped the movement spread quickly across geographic areas and industries; linked it with similar campaigns happening within and adjacent to the labour movement; and gave organisers the belief that transformation in the face of daunting odds is indeed possible. This study builds on existing literature about unions' use of media by showing how networked media are influencing the organising strategies and structure of contemporary unions (Martinez Lucio and Walker 2005). As a worker-led movement, SBWU relied on the existing social ties among baristas to organise its campaign and curate its social media feeds. The trusting relationships workers had with each other insulated their campaign against anti-union rhetoric, specifically ones that attempted to brand the union as a "third party". Moreover, SBWU's use of semi-autonomous organising committees provided organisers with tactical flexibility and encouraged a plurality of voices to be expressed. While large trade unions have been ignorant of or hostile to new technologies (Lee 2004), SBWU leveraged networked media to democratise its campaign and build partnerships with labour allies and community activists.

Studying a nascent movement has obvious limitations. Several workers told me they are unsure how this campaign will proceed. Some organisers are in the process of creating regional networks to support contract negotiations and recruitment. It is too early to conclude that this campaign failed to develop institutional capacity, because that is an ongoing issue that organisers are addressing. Researching the first year of this campaign, however, allowed me to examine how social media aided the movement's initial rapid growth. Although social media helped SBWU mobilise workers

and community members at scale during the early stages of the campaign, that mobilisation has slowed in recent months. The number of election filings has fallen from about 70 in March to fewer than 10 in August (Scheiber 2022). It is unclear whether organisers will be able to sustain the movement's momentum with volunteer support and continue generating news coverage that holds the public's attention. Lastly, the US political and legal context creates an uncertain future for SBWU. The National Labor Relations Board has charged Starbucks with a series of unfair labour practice complaints throughout 2022; but the office is under-resourced after years of cuts and large companies like Starbucks have the financial resources to prolong cases and avoid negotiating with workers altogether. The NLRB is so understaffed in fact that the agency announced in November 2022 that it may be forced to furlough staff and reduce operations if Congress does not increase the agency's funding.

SBWU provides important lessons about the role of communication and media in contemporary labour organising. Social media provided Starbucks' workers with venues in which to build cohesion and solidarity and mobilise grassroots support. So far, SBWU has proven adept at leveraging social media's interactivity, bringing workers into the conversation and highlighting their personal stories (Gibney et al. 2013). Simply posting links about events, news coverage, and strike funds mirrors the one-way communication model that trade unions used in earlier eras (Carneiro and Costa 2020). This study detailed the logistical challenges workers encounter when building a militant labour movement within networked media – one that is capable not only of claiming symbolic power but also of reshaping the relationship between capital and labour. How organisers navigate these challenges in the coming years will reveal workers' collective power, the institutional constraints that they face, and the very future and composition of the labour movement.

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About the Author

Gino Canella

Gino Canella is an assistant professor of journalism and media studies at Emerson College. His research examines media activism, documentary, and labour. He produces documentary films with grassroots organisers and studies how movements use media to reframe their issues and foster networks of supporters. His book, *Activist Media: Documenting Movements and Networked Solidarity*, was published in 2022 by Rutgers University Press.