

SPECIAL ISSUE PAPER

The combustible mix of coalitional and discursive power: British trade unions, social media and the People's Assembly Against Austerity

Torsten Geelan 

Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow at the Department of Sociology, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

Correspondence

Torsten Geelan, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow at the Department of Sociology, University of Copenhagen, Østerfarimagsgade 5, Building 16, Copenhagen K1014, Denmark.
Email: tg@soc.ku.dk

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Abstract

This article investigates how the British trade union movement sought to challenge the politics of austerity after the North Atlantic financial crisis of 2008 by founding a union-led coalition: the People's Assembly Against Austerity. To lay the ground for the study, it redefines the concept of discursive power as the capacity of trade unions to influence the public debate by producing and self-mediating frames and circulating them through the mainstream media, the Internet and social media to a mass audience. Data were collected over 3 years (2013–2015) using interviews and scraping tweets from Twitter. The findings reveal how the People's Assembly created and sustained a heterogeneous coalition through a policy of nonpartisanship and a consensus-driven decentralised network of grassroots local assemblies orchestrated by a national organisation. The article contributes to the literature on trade union revitalisation by demonstrating how combining coalitional and discursive power is a combustible mix that can help revitalise the political influence of trade unions.

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KEYWORDS

austerity, coalitional power, discursive power, information and communication technologies, People's Assembly Against Austerity, social media, trade union power, trade union revitalisation, United Kingdom

INTRODUCTION

The dramatic collapse of collective labour market regulation in Britain and the decline of trade union power since the 1980s is by now very well documented. During this neoliberal¹ transformation of industrial relations, the British state played a critical role in dismantling collectivist institutions compared to other European countries (Baccaro & Howell, 2017, p. 72). While the first phase of deregulation took place under a series of Conservative governments, the second phase of highly limited reregulation took place under 'New Labour' governments that embraced the main tenets of neoliberalism (Smith, 2009) and deliberately reduced the influence of trade unions on decision-making and the selection of parliamentary candidates (Hyman & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2010, p. 322). Thus, by the time of the North Atlantic financial crisis of 2008, British trade unions were in a historically weak position to seize the opportunity 'to harness popular anger, apprehension and discontent in a campaign... for a reconstituted "social market economy"' (Baccaro et al., 2010, p. 365). Union membership levels were half of their pre-Thatcher peak, collective bargaining coverage had dwindled in the private sector, strike levels were low and almost entirely located in the public sector, and the ability of trade unions to shape government policy was at an all-time low (Kelly, 2015). To make the situation even more challenging, the often hostile right-wing press accounted for two-thirds of the newspaper market (McNair, 2009, p. 3).

This article investigates how the debilitated British labour movement sought to challenge the austerity measures that were imposed by the government in the aftermath of the financial crash by establishing the People's Assembly Against Austerity (The People's Assembly). This attempt to compensate for the loss of power through the revitalisation strategies of coalition-building with other social movements and political action has been a notable trend in Anglo-Saxon countries (Ibsen & Tapia, 2017). While a wealth of literature has been produced over the years on a variety of union coalitions (Heery et al., 2012; Milkman & Ott, 2014; Tattersall, 2010; Wills & Simms, 2004), the role of new information and communication technologies² (ICTs) has not been examined systematically despite its obvious importance for networking, campaigning and influencing public debate. This study contributes to the literature on trade union revitalisation by demonstrating how combining coalitional and discursive power is a combustible mix that can help revitalise the political influence of trade unions.

The article is structured as follows. The next section lays the ground for the study through a review of the existing literature. Section 3 then describes the economic, political and ideological

¹Following Stephanie Mudge (2008), the term is used here to refer to the 'political face' of neoliberalism: policies such as privatisation, deregulation, liberalisation and monetarism, as well as an orientation towards business, finance and white-collar professionals over trade unions and the workers they represent.

²Old ICTs include the telephone, fax, radio, television, audio and video. New ICTs include the personal computer, mobile phone, the Internet and social media.

context of the case study. Section 4 outlines the data collection and methodology used: a mix of interviews with union officials and activists, and analysis of tweets scraped from Twitter. Section 5 presents the results while Section 6 discusses them and concludes.

TRADE UNION POWER IN THE DIGITAL AGE

This literature review begins laying the ground for the study of how the People's Assembly helped the British trade union movement to challenge the government's austerity measures by outlining two specific forms of power resources—coalitional power and discursive power. Taken together, these constitute the ability of trade unions to network with other actors and to influence public debate. While these conceptualisations are found to be a useful starting point, the concept of discursive power fails to explicitly theorise the role of mainstream media and trade union use of new ICTs. To address this oversight, the next part discusses some of the key literature on trade union revitalisation and new ICTs, demonstrating that the discursive power of contemporary union-led coalitions is strengthened by the use of the Internet and social media. The final part, drawing upon scholarship from the field of media and communication studies, focuses attention on four communication processes to redefine discursive power for the digital age.

Coalitional and discursive power

Coalitional power has been defined as the capacity of trade unions to form coalitions with other groups, movements and organisations and being able to harness these for mobilisations and campaigns (Ellem et al., 2020, p. 5; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2018, p. 31; Lehndorff et al., 2018, p. 11; Schmalz et al., 2018, pp. 122–123). Comparative research on union coalition building has found that alliances with others that possess a diverse and vibrant activist base can provide access to new constituencies, increase the legitimacy of union campaigns, and strengthen their ability to mobilise (Frege et al., 2004, pp. 139–141). Within coalitions, trade unions may either set the agenda and force their partners to accept a subordinate role, collaborate as equal partners or lend their unconditional support to partners which have predefined aims and tactics (Frege et al., 2004). One can also distinguish between coalitions in terms of the way they interact with the state. On the one hand, trade unions may collaborate with institutionalised 'insiders' such as NGOs and lobbyists in mainstream politics. On the other hand, they may cooperate with more radical 'outsiders' such as social movements to generate external pressure on political allies and the government (Frege et al., 2004). No matter what type of coalitions trade unions seek to create, relations with other groups, movements and organisations are likely to involve tensions due to differences in structure, ideology and political agendas. Achieving synergies and sustaining coalitions over long periods of time is therefore a very difficult task (Heckscher & Carre, 2006, p. 617). Some of the key determinants of success include common concerns, effective governance and acting at multiple scales (Tattersall, 2010).

Turning to discursive power, it has been defined as the capacity of trade unions to influence public debate about socioeconomic issues such as job cuts, exploitative work conditions, or cuts to welfare benefits (Ellem et al., 2020, p. 5; Lehndorff et al., 2018, p. 11; Schmalz et al., 2018, pp. 122–123). This requires a politicisation of injustice and a persuasive argument that convinces people that there are desirable and achievable solutions (Gumbrell-McCormick &

Hyman, 2018, p. 31). The key to communicating effectively is framing: the construction of a framework of interpretation, a narrative, which shapes how people understand and respond to social issues (Lévesque & Murray, 2013). For example, Kelly's (2005, p. 66) influential body of work has demonstrated how mobilising workers depends on frames that appeal to notions of social justice and fairness, attribute blame for their problems, and propose credible remedies. And for much of the 20th century 'Marxist ideas constituted a narrative that could be deployed by union activists to legitimate opposition to neoliberal reforms' (Kelly, 2011, p. 23).

However, such narratives only become a source of power when circulated, either *internally* within trade unions or *externally* to society as a whole (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2018: 152-153). The internal dimension involves creating a collective identity through a critical debate over arguments and positions, whereas the external dimension involves communicating to journalists, politicians and the wider public via the media (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2018, pp. 152–153). The problem is that the role of the mainstream media and new ICTs in trade union attempts to reach and influence public debate has largely been overlooked by industrial relations theory (Carstensen et al., 2022; Gahan & Pekerek 2013; Refslund & Arnholtz, 2021). To address this oversight, the next part discusses some of the key literature on trade union revitalisation, the Internet and social media.

Trade union revitalisation and new ICTs

The debate on how the trade union movement is engaging with new ICTs to rebuild and exercise power has become the central focus of a small but growing strand of the revitalisation literature (for an encompassing overview see Geelan, 2021). Broadly speaking, the relationship between trade union power and ICTs can be characterised as being *dialectical*. Technologies are designed and produced by people in society, and these technologies may, in turn, enable, constrain and condition human activity in unpredictable ways. As a result, technology does not have one clearly determinable impact on society, but rather has multiple ones that stand in opposition: the Internet and social media may be a means of control, surveillance and propaganda while simultaneously being a means of empowerment and resistance (Fuchs, 2020, p. 164). In this sense, trade unions are faced with challenges that may undermine their influence as well as opportunities that they may benefit from if they are able to actively translate them into revitalisation (Frege & Kelly, 2004, p. 32). In addition, the nature, scope and outcome of union experimentation with ICTs have been found to be *mediated* by internal factors such as communication practices and external factors such as the wider context and interactions with government, employers and the media (Behrens et al., 2004; Ibsen & Tapia, 2017; Martínez Lucio, 2003; Martínez Lucio & Walker, 2005; Pasquier & Wood, 2018).

Turning to the more empirical question of how union-led coalitions like the People's Assembly are using the Internet and social media to secure historic victories (i.e., wage rises and minimum wage laws), the most prominent examples are to be found in the United States. The first is the OUR Walmart campaign aimed at organising low-wage workers in the retail sector. The campaign is driven by worker centres (labour-oriented advocacy groups) founded and supported by the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Wood (2015) found that the networks formed by workers using Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram helped them to develop a strong collective identity and facilitated high levels of participation by allowing people to take part through tiny acts of participation (sharing, liking re-tweeting) (Wood, 2015, p. 268). Social

media also helped to amplify offline collective actions by increasing their visibility; for example, during the 2012 'Black Friday' day of action, only 600 workers were involved out of a workforce of over a million, but OUR Walmart claims that this generated something like 300,000 Facebook posts and 60,000 tweets on Twitter (Pasquier & Wood, 2018, p. 3).

The other illustrative example of a union-led coalition is the FF15 movement advocating for the minimum wage to be raised to \$15 per hour, which is also backed by SEIU. Similar to the OUR Walmart campaign, one of the factors that helps to explain the achievements of FF15 is its huge presence on social media: more than 300,000 likes on its main Facebook page, tens of thousands of followers on Twitter and millions of views of online videos. Pasquier et al. (2020, pp. 10–19) demonstrate how this has been achieved through mobilisation activities that combine the traditional collectivist logic of action (e.g., top-down and hierarchical) with the new connectivist logic (e.g., decentralised and grassroots). More specifically, the research reveals that the movement is composed of a union-orchestrated network of local grassroots organisations that stage seemingly spontaneous worker-led mobilisations, which help enhance legitimacy in the eyes of the media and the public. With regard to the movement's frames, these are designed by consultants that imitate a connectivist communication style (personalised, brief, visual, emotive). Finally, the movement's expansion relies both on establishing an offline coalition of allied organisations and on building bridges with social movements online. Despite the hostility of the mainstream media, FF15 has also generated 'extensive and mostly positive media coverage' (Pasquier & Wood, 2018, p. 3) alongside a vibrant debate online (Frangi et al., 2020).

What the two examples above clearly demonstrate is that the discursive power of contemporary union-led coalitions is often strengthened by the use of new ICTs. The Internet and social media can be used to increase participation in collective action, provide a discursive space to voice grievances and amplify the visibility of trade union frames (Pasquier & Wood, 2018). This potential for amplification is particularly important because a considerable body of research in the United States and United Kingdom has shown that mainstream media coverage is often severely critical of mobilisations by the trade union movement and strongly supportive of employers (e.g., Glasgow University Media Group, 1976; Martin, 2019; Puette, 1992). One can also see how discursive power is interwoven with coalitional power. For instance, a heterogeneous coalition can improve the legitimacy of trade union actions and frames in public debate by demonstrating the breadth and diversity of the social base that supports them. Moreover, coalitions can use new ICTs to expand activist networks by disseminating content that helps to build bridges with other actors online.

All of this is in line with the seminal work of Manuel Castells (2013) who has convincingly argued that power in the digital age increasingly lies in the ability to create, maintain and shape mass self-communication networks, combining resources and sharing goals. As touched on earlier, though, the success of such 'collaborative networks' depends largely upon the presence of certain attributes (Heckscher & McCarthy, 2014, pp. 644–648). First, a purpose that can inspire diverse people to orient their actions towards the same general cause. Second, a platform which seeks to maximize the ability of members to use the organisation for their own purposes, rather than the traditional bureaucratic structure of trade unions which focuses on effectively implementing plans defined at the top. Third, an orchestrator that provides strategic oversight and coordinates the independent and spontaneous activities of individuals and groups.

The circulation of anti-austerity protest

Having established the importance of new ICTs, one can now theorise more precisely the role they play in trade union attempts to reach and influence public debate. To achieve this, one can fruitfully draw upon the work of Bart Cammaerts titled *The Circulation of Anti-austerity Protest* (2018). His theoretical lens focuses attention on four key communication processes:

- The first is the *production* of frames in an effort to communicate the aims of the movement, to build collective identities and to mobilise.
- The second is the *self-mediation* of frames in which they are circulated using a variety of media and new ICTs such as websites, Twitter and Facebook. These can also be used to coordinate and share recordings of political actions.
- The third is the *media representation* of frames and actions in the mainstream media who are essential for reaching a mass audience. The nature and tone of media coverage is shaped by a range of factors such as the political context and the ideological biases of news media outlets. Trade unions therefore need to develop strategies to best manage their public visibility.
- Fourth is the *reception* of frames by an audience which ultimately leads to opinion formation. The target audience is diverse and includes political parties, other social movements and the wider public who differ according to age, gender, class and race (Cammaerts, 2018, p. 43).

In light of this, I propose to redefine the concept of discursive power as the capacity of trade unions to produce and self-mediate frames and circulate them through the mainstream media and new ICTs to a mass audience (see Figure 1). Following the dialectical characterisation outlined earlier, the mainstream media (newspapers, television, radio) and new ICTs are considered to be arenas of power struggle, which are often dominated by actors such as the government and employers, although they can sometimes be used by trade unions to exercise discursive power. The next section describes the economic, political and ideological context of the case study before applying this new theoretical understanding to the People's Assembly.

CASE STUDY: THE PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY AGAINST AUSTERITY

The politics of austerity and mainstream media coverage (2008–2010)

The contentious debate on austerity measures began in the immediate aftermath of the North Atlantic financial crisis. Towards the end of 2008, the Labour party under the leadership of Gordon Brown nationalised several banks and poured more than one hundred billion pounds into the banking system to avoid a systemic crash. These bank bailouts, combined with decreasing exports, a sharp increase in the cost of welfare and falling tax revenue, led to a swelling of public debt. In the run up to the general election of 2010, political parties on both the left and the right emphasised the need for cuts in public spending to reduce the government deficit by shrinking the public sector and cutting welfare services. This support for a politics of austerity was reinforced by the media; in fact, during this period most of the major national newspapers presented a circumscribed account of both the cause of the financial crisis and the range of policy options available to ameliorate its consequences (Berry, 2015). Keynesian stimulus was rarely discussed due to an overwhelming reliance on employers and the City as sources as well

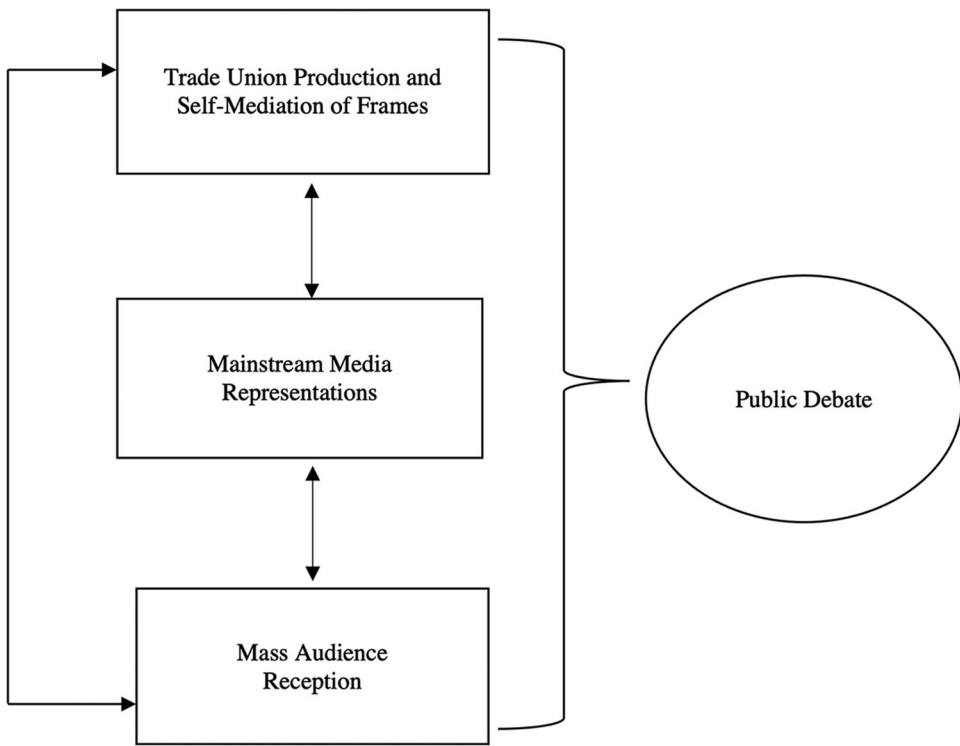


FIGURE 1 Redefining the concept of discursive power to include the four communication processes involved in the circulation of trade union frames. *Source:* Author's own elaboration

as the Labour Government, whose austerity-lite campaign pledges at the time meant that there was an almost complete lack of voices opposing austerity. This state of affairs was compounded by the highly limited space given to trade unions in the media. Even the BBC's news coverage concentrated almost entirely on describing the necessity of cuts to public spending and regressive taxation, thereby purveying the view that there was no alternative (Berry, 2016). In the end, the general election resulted in the Conservative Party forming a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats. In the emergency budget of June 2010, the new government announced £81 billion worth of cuts to public sector services over 4 years—£7 billion of which would come from cutting welfare benefits (Sawyer, 2012). Thus, British trade unions faced a highly unfavourable terrain of action as they sought to defend the welfare state and the jobs of hundreds of thousands of union members working in the public sector.

Trade union responses to austerity and the emergence of an anti-austerity movement (2010–2013)

In the wake of the Labour Party's electoral defeat and Gordon Brown's resignation, a leadership contest was held during which some of Britain's largest trade unions—Unite the Union (Unite), GMB, and Unison—gave decisive support to Ed Miliband's successful campaign (Jobson & Wickham-Jones, 2011). His victory represented a departure from 'New Labour', the beginning of a leftward shift within the Labour party membership and the first step towards developing an

alternative agenda to the austerity measures being imposed by the coalition government. This was followed by large trade union demonstrations and strikes at the national level organised through the British Trade Union Congress (TUC) in alliance with new protest groups (Martínez Lucio, 2018, p. 98). On 26 March, 2011, the TUC 'March for the Alternative' reportedly gathered about 250,000 people in central London (Doward et al., 2011). Then in November of the same year, a 1-day public sector strike brought an estimated two and a half million people onto the streets nation-wide in what represented the single biggest day of strike action in Britain since the 1926 general strike (Darlington, 2013). A year later the TUC organised another slightly smaller march in London titled 'A Future that Works', calling for an alternative economic strategy prioritising jobs, growth and people. And shortly after, at the European level, the TUC backed a coordinated European-wide day of protest against austerity.

In parallel, several high-profile anti-austerity organisations emerged across the country. Among the most notable were UK Uncut and their direct actions against corporate tax avoidance, Occupy London and its occupation outside St. Paul's Cathedral, and demonstrations by the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts. Research on the frames these organisations produced and circulated during 2011 and 2012 found that they relied heavily on two inter-related discourses: a renewed politics of redistribution with a view to ensuring social justice and fostering equality and the need for real democracy to achieve it (Cammaerts, 2018, p. 48). Furthermore, content analyses of mainstream media representations of all three organisations found that they succeeded in generating considerable media attention, thereby broadcasting their frames to a mass audience despite a negative bias that was particularly pronounced in right-wing newspapers (Cammaerts, 2018, pp. 132–133). Local campaign groups were also engaged in protest actions to defend local services such as NHS facilities and libraries, co-ordinated (to some degree) by the Coalition of Resistance: an umbrella group for local and sectoral campaigns once chaired by the socialist MP Tony Benn. However, in the beginning of 2013, disenchantment with the Labour Party's weak stance on austerity had grown within the anti-austerity movement, and there was a sense that what was needed was a concerted effort to bring together disparate local and national groups.

The founding of the People's Assembly Against Austerity (2013–)

The People's Assembly was formed after a group of politicians, trade unionists and social movement activists wrote an open letter to *The Guardian* (2013) calling for a broad movement to challenge the politics of austerity. The signatories of the article included members of the Stop the War Coalition, the Coalition of Resistance, the socialist organisation Counterfire, the left-wing of the Labour Party, Green MPs, and trade unionists from the Trade Union Congress, Unite, the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), the National Union of Teachers and the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, among others. The hope was to create a broad united national coalition against austerity that included national and local unions, anti-cuts campaigns, and other campaigning organisations. The launch event took place on 22 June 2013 and was attended by more than 4000 people.

As an umbrella organisation, the People's Assembly was to be based on affiliation by local assembly groups, and local and national organisations who were in agreement with the founding statement. A national office (based at the Morning Star offices in East London) was subsequently established to help assist local assembly groups with meetings, lobbying, marches and direct action, and to organise large-scale national demonstrations in collaboration with as

many groups as possible. Already after the first year, 80 local People's Assemblies had been established, with most having between 30 and 50 activists (Maignashca et al., 2016, p. 41). Surprisingly, though, no industrial relations research has been conducted on the People's Assembly to date. Thus, very little is known about its role in British trade union responses to austerity measures—despite its strong presence on Twitter and Facebook, impressive mass mobilisations (especially in 2014 and 2015) and continued existence.

This study, therefore, asks the following question: To what extent did the coalitional and discursive power of the People's Assembly help the British trade union movement challenge austerity measures in public debate?

This line of enquiry gives rise to the following three subquestions:

- 1) What were the strategy and organisational form of the People's Assembly?
- 2) How did the People's Assembly use social media to produce and self-mediate frames, and circulate them through the mainstream media and new ICTs to a mass audience?
- 3) What evidence is there to suggest that the People's Assembly helped generate conditions conducive to the successful Labour Party leadership election of Jeremy Corbyn on a distinctly anti-austerity agenda?

DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY

Data collection

Data was gathered using interviews and scraping tweets from Twitter.

To gain insight into the organisational form and strategy of the People's Assembly as well as the production and self-mediation of frames, I conducted seven in-depth semi-structured interviews with trade union officials, national organisers, and local assembly activists using purposive sampling (see Table 1 for an overview).

These interviews were mostly held between 2015 and 2016. The decision to focus solely on trade unionists from PCS and Unite was made on the grounds that they were most heavily involved in the national organisation's day-to-day governance. At the time, the political orientation of both Unite and PCS could be characterised as left-wing, but it is worth noting that

TABLE 1 List of interviewees

Position/affiliation	Date of interviews
1. Chair of the People's Assembly and Assistant General Secretary of Unite the Union	24.1.2017
2. Treasurer of the People's Assembly and Director of Communications, Campaigns and Organising at the Public and Commercial Services Union	15.11.2013 and 19.05.2015
3. National Secretary of the People's Assembly	16.11.2016
4. National Organiser for the People's Assembly	16.11.2016
5. Former National Organiser for the People's Assembly	24.11.2016
6. Local activist of the Cambridge People's Assembly	24.11.2016
7. Local activist of the Cambridge People's Assembly	29.11.2016

while Unite was the Labour Party's single largest donor, PCS had never been affiliated to any political party. The rationale for including interviews with a very small number of activists in Cambridge was to gain contextual insight into the relationship between the national organisation and the local assemblies established after the People's Assembly was founded in 2013.

The interviews were conducted in London and Cambridge, recorded with the permission of the interviewees, and subsequently transcribed. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 min. Temporally, the interviews focused on a highly active 2-year period between May 2013 and October 2015. In terms of activities organised by the People's Assembly, this covered the launch event (23 June 2013), the first assembly (7 December 2013), the first annual delegate conference (13 March 2014), the series of People's Question Time events (9 October 2014 to 30 April 2015) and two national demonstrations: 'No More Austerity—Demand the Alternative' (21 June 2014) and 'End Austerity Now' (20 June 2015). In parallel, I also attended each of these events in London to learn about the organisation and to gain the understanding required to develop the interview guides. With regard to the broader political context, this same period covered the run-up to, and aftermath of, Ed Miliband's electoral defeat in the May 2015 election, and the subsequent Labour leadership contest, which ended in Jeremy Corbyn's unexpected victory.

Finally, I collected all tweets published on the People's Assembly account (@pplsassembly) between 6 March 2013 (when it first started tweeting) and 15 October 2015. The aim was to acquire more detailed insight into the national organisation's use of social media to produce and self-mediate frames, organise mass mobilisations and archive protest artifacts (Cammaerts, 2018). Twitter allows users to publish short messages (which can contain up to 140 characters as well as pictures, videos and links) and interact with one another. The scraping of tweets from Twitter was performed using the social media listening tool Pulsar. The Twitter account had 39,000 followers, which by way of comparison, is more than any single UK union had at the time (Hodder & Houghton, 2015, p. 175). To protect the privacy of individuals in the Twitter data set, I only quote tweets by the People's Assembly, trade unions and trade union officials, journalists, politicians and well-known social movements, who would all legitimately expect their tweets to be public (Hodder & Houghton, 2015).

Methodology

The analysis proceeded along four dimensions similar to those of Pasquier et al. (2020) in their study of the FF15 movement in the United States: strategy, organisational form and the production and self-mediation of frames.

My examination of the overall strategy and organisational form of the People's Assembly was primarily based on the interview transcripts, which enabled me to gain insight into the organisation's tactics, governance (i.e., structure and decision-making processes) and human and financial resources.

Whereas my investigation of the production and self-mediation of the movement's frames was based on an analysis of tweets scraped from the People's Assembly Twitter account. In the first part of this analysis, I conducted a detailed examination of all the posts published by @pplsassembly ($n = 5652$), which represented about five per cent of the total volume of posts and engagements that mentioned the People's Assembly over the time period of the study ($n = 123,525$). These posts included *original tweets* (a tweet composed and posted by the People's Assembly) and *retweets* (a tweet written by another user that the People's Assembly

reposted for its followers to view) as well as all the likes and retweets that these posts received, and any embedded content (e.g., hashtags, photos, videos, links). I analysed this data (2410 original tweets and 3242 retweets) using 12 categories derived from the literature. In cases of overlap, I coded the tweet with the category, which I assessed to be the most dominant.

The first three categories—diagnostic, prognostic and motivational—are often present during the production of frames by social movements (Cammaerts, 2018, pp. 41, 58).

- *Diagnostic* tweets aim to articulate social issues, their causes and culpable agents and to weaken the frames of opponents.
- *Prognostic* tweets aim to articulate possible solutions or remedies to social issues, and propose a particular strategy and set of tactics to achieve the identified goals.
- *Motivational* tweets call for people to participate in mass mobilisations coordinated by the People's Assembly or distribute information about ongoing ('live action reporting') and future actions.

The next three categories—frame bridging, frame amplification and frame extension—relate to the efforts of social movements to increase the resonance of frames and generate support for them (Gahan & Pekarek, 2013, pp. 763–764).

- *Frame bridging* are tweets that link several frames that are ideologically similar such as calls for redistribution with demands for recognition (of gender, ethnic and sexual difference) as well as other political struggles like climate change and animal rights (Cammaerts, 2018, p. 62).
- *Frame amplification* are tweets that involve attempts to circulate widely the content produced by the People's Assembly to gain traction and visibility.
- *Frame extension* are tweets that aim to draw connections between the values and interests of the People's Assembly and those of other groups.

The remaining six categories—democracy, fundraising, news dissemination, archiving protest artefacts, recruitment and others—were included after a preliminary analysis of the purpose of the tweets to capture how the People's Assembly used Twitter to support these activities.

- *Democracy* are tweets that advertise grassroots meetings.
- *Fundraising* are tweets that encourage individuals or organisations to support the People's Assembly financially or promote fundraisers.
- *News dissemination* are tweets that provide updates about the movement or promote links to articles and video reportage published by the People's Assembly or the news media.
- *Archiving protest artefacts* are tweets that contain photographic and audio-visual self-representations of the movement and its actions circulating through time and space (Cammaerts, 2018, p. 95–96).
- *Recruitment* are tweets that urge people to volunteer for the national People's Assembly or for trade unionists to put forward motions for affiliation.
- *Other* are conversational tweets between the People's Assembly and other users or tweets that didn't fit any of the above categories.

In the second part, I draw on the analysis of the tweets to provide a contextualised and narrative account of the People's Assembly's Twitter activity in the run-up to, and aftermath of, the two most significant events: the 2014 and 2015 national demonstrations.

RESULTS

The overall strategy of the People's Assembly

The main political objective of the People's Assembly was to make the coalition government abandon its austerity programme or to replace it with one that would. What then was the overall strategy for achieving this? Etymologically the term strategy is a military metaphor deriving from ancient Greek, which denotes the planning of a whole campaign or war in contrast to the tactics deployed (Hyman, 2007, p. 198). In the case of the People's Assembly, the overall strategy was to create a broad national anti-austerity coalition linking together activists from trade unions, social movements, community groups and solidarity campaigns to engage in local and national political action.

In terms of manoeuvring, there were three clearly discernible tactics. The *first tactic* was a policy of nonpartisanship—no affiliation with any political party—which helped facilitate the building of a heterogeneous coalition comprising a range of social actors with different political histories, orientations and identities. The key to sustaining the coalition (as will be discussed below) was to involve grassroots local assemblies and affiliated organisations in shaping the People's Assembly as equal partners with trade unions. At the time of the study (2014–2015), 50 national organisations had affiliated, including 12 trade unions (CWU, FBU, TUC, UCU, NUJ, NUT, Unite, PCS, TSSA, RMT, Unison and ASLEF), three student groups (e.g., Student Assembly Against Austerity), several national and international campaign groups (e.g., Greece solidarity campaign), several antiwar and anti-cuts coalitions (e.g., Black Activists Rising Against the Cuts, Stop the War Coalition), two political parties (The Green Party, Left Unity), one antiracist organisation (e.g., British Muslim Initiative), one religious organisation (Muslim Council of Britain) and two think tanks (New Economics Institute, Institute of Employment Rights). From the outset, Unite was heavily involved and, according to the Treasurer of the People's Assembly, this provided the legitimacy necessary to get a broad coalition of trade unions to join the movement:³ 'If Unite was not involved, I think a lot of the other unions wouldn't be... Unite's presence gave a lot of other organisations and people the ability to be involved'.

The *second tactic* was growing the People's Assembly through the 'geographical propagation' (Pasquier et al., 2020, p. 12) of local assemblies orchestrated by a national organisation. By the time of the first national delegate conference in 2014, more than eighty local assemblies had been established across the country. The largest and most active assemblies were, in the words of one of the National Organisers, 'Manchester without a shadow of doubt, followed closely by Leeds, Cardiff, the South West, Bristol, Brighton and Swindon'.

The *third and final tactic* was seeking to exercise coalitional and discursive power by organising local and national mass mobilisations at key moments in the political cycle using a

³To ensure that the Coalition of Resistance (a coalition formed in 2010 to oppose cuts) was not seen as a competing organisation, it was closed by its founders but its Facebook account (which had 65,599 likes on 5 July 2013) continued to be used by the People's Assembly during the period investigated.

range of self-mediation practices. According to interviewees, this action-oriented approach had the added benefit of helping the People's Assembly to grow while also avoiding political infighting over policy proposals. Similar to other anti-austerity movement organisations at the time (Cammaerts, 2018), the national organisation of the People's Assembly made prolific use of Facebook and Twitter for the purpose of mobilising and coalition-building. More specifically, to motivate people to participate in mass mobilisations by distributing information about ongoing and future actions, to archive and share audio-visual evidence of actions, to disseminate news, to promote grassroots meetings, to supplement the offline coalition-building strategy by engaging with other groups online and to amplify the circulation of frames.

The organisational form of the people's assembly

The organisational structure of the People's Assembly can be characterised as a decentralised network of grassroots local assemblies centrally orchestrated by a national organisation and based on consensus decision-making. To keep the governance structure as light as possible while retaining some level of accountability, the signatories decided on four organisational bodies, which supported the conditions required to sustain a collaborative network over time: shared information platforms, shared behavioural norms and a common mission (Heckscher & McCarthy, 2014).

The first organisational body was the *management committee* which made the day-to-day decisions about strategy, tactics, actions, and logistics. It was composed of a small number of people from the signatories' group with representatives from Unite, PCS, NUT, CWU, the Green Party, the socialist organisation Counterfire, the Coalition of Resistance, and the Stop the War Coalition. The committee was cochaired by Romaine Phoenix (Green Party) and Steve Turner (Assistant General Secretary of Unite).

The second organisational body was the *local assembly groups* mentioned earlier, which had the aim of strengthening existing campaign groups in local areas and uniting them with the People's Assembly.

The third and related organisational body was the *assembly*: a bi-annual gathering of representatives from local groups (one person per assembly). It was designed to facilitate an exchange between the national and the local level about ongoing activities and future events. According to the national organiser of the People's Assembly at the time, these exchanges were absolutely crucial for keeping the grassroots motivated, and for sharing experiences between local assemblies and the national office.

The fourth and final organisational body was the motion-based *national conference* designed to give local groups influence over the strategy and future direction of the People's Assembly. It involved a precirculated agenda and motions submitted by affiliated organisations. The organisations that were formally affiliated to the People's Assembly were invited to elect 'delegates' who were eligible to vote. Affiliates included local assembly groups (10 delegates), national organisations (10 delegates), and local organisations such as trade union branches (two delegates).

This governance structure was formally adopted at the first national conference in March 2014, which was attended by over seven hundred delegates. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the hierarchical disposition of trade unions, an amendment for an even more decentralised organisational form to enhance participatory democracy was defeated.

In terms of financial resources, a report at the conference revealed that the national organisation was operating with an income of just under £70,000. The three main sources of income were one-off donations from seven national trade unions (£12,350), ticket sales from the national launch event (£24,395), donations by national organisations, local union branches and campaign groups (£23,550) and regular individual donations (about £830 per month). Of all the sources of income, the Treasurer stated that ‘trade union funding is absolutely crucial. We wouldn’t be able to put on any demonstration or event without it’.

The production and self-mediation of frames

Figure 2 provides a temporal overview of all @pplassembly posts and engagements; as one would expect, both soared on the movement’s major days of mass mobilisation, especially the 2014 and 2015 national demonstrations.

Moving on to a more fine-grained analysis of the production and self-mediation of frames (see Table 2), we can see that the most common type of tweet was motivational (21%).

However, as the examples below illustrate, the great majority of these tweets distributed information about ongoing or future actions rather than explicit calls for people to participate in mass mobilisations (e.g., marches, rallies, petitions, direct action):

‘Join us tmrw 6 pm Downing street to hand the #PeoplesBudget petition to Downing Str.’ (18 March 2014)

‘We’ll be marching on Saturday—will you? See you on the streets #NoMoreAusterity’ (9 June 2014)

This echoes the findings of earlier studies on anti-austerity movements in the United States, Greece and Spain (see Theocharis et al., 2015, p. 210).

One can also see that many of the political actions orchestrated by the People’s Assembly were recorded and archived in tweets (15.8), generating about a third of all engagement:

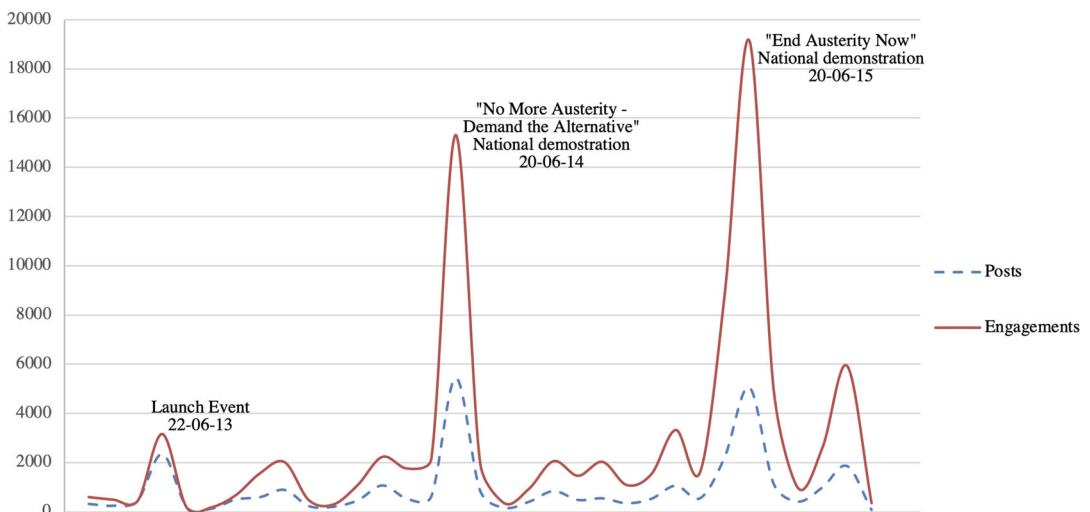


FIGURE 2 People’s assembly twitter posts and engagements: 6 March 2013 to 15 October 2015. Source: Author’s own calculations on Pulsar data set [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

TABLE 2 The production and self-mediation of frames

Category	N	% of total tweets	Sum of favourites	Sum of retweets
Motivational	1183	21	5339	9252
Archiving protest artefacts	883	15.6	6120	9375
Democracy	782	13.8	944	2714
Frame extension	652	11.5	1037	2256
News dissemination	605	10.7	1088	3101
Frame amplification	346	6.1	1311	2967
Recruitment	169	3	148	377
Fundraising	156	2.8	195	527
Diagnostic	104	1.8	653	1584
Prognostic	58	1	312	593
Frame bridging	20	0.4	76	132
Other (incl. 484 conversational tweets)	694	12.3	1143	1582
Total	5652	100	18,366	34,460

Source: Author's own elaboration.

'Max Levitas, 99, marching today. Veteran of Cable St antifascist #hero @OwenJones84 <http://t.co/TCEDq4EM94>' (21 June 2014)

'The front of the March. Including @CarolineLucas @HackneyAbbott @charlottechurch <http://t.co/256Ou26c5a>' (20 June 2015)

Tweets that sought to amplify the dissemination of movement frames were relatively less common (6.1%) but played an important role in enhancing visibility. Many of these tweets involved either promoting press conferences, asking the public to publicise actions, or harnessing the involvement of celebrities such as Russell Brand and Charlotte Church:

'#PeoplesAssembly press conf. @SteveT_Unite Unite is committed to building the broadest coalition to stop the government' (26 March 2013)

'RT @nlondonpa: Pls RT, FB share, blog & shout from rooftops about demo outside Tory conf in #Manchester on Sept29! @pplsassembly' (24 September 2013)

'Russell Brand on why he'll be joining the #NoMoreAusterity demo 21 June. Pls RT @rustyrocks' (30 April 2014)

'Will you be marching to #EndAusterityNow this Saturday at Bank of England at 12 pm? @charlottechurch will be!' (18 June 2015)

Thunderclap campaigns, which let people rally together on Twitter to spread a message, were also an important amplifier. For example, the day before the 2015 demonstration the People's Assembly asked its followers to sign up to re-tweet the following message: 'Hundreds of thousands of us will say #EndAusterityNow this Saturday, June 20th! Will you be listening David Cameron?' 1080 people signed up, achieving an estimated social reach of 2,201,767. In addition to this, the examples below illustrate how the People's Assembly urged people to tweet the hashtag #EndAusterityNow until it was trending internationally:

‘If u can’t make the demo do what you can on social media if you can. Using #EndAusterityNow #June Demo’

‘We’re trending! Thanks everyone and keep tweeting to keep the message out there #EndAusterityNow’

‘64,000 individual tweets already for #EndAusterityNow #JuneDemo Let’s get it top tweet internationally and scare the pro-cuts bankers!’

‘We’re now trending internationally! #EndAusterityNow’

Turning to frame extension tweets, these comprised more than one-tenth of all posts (11.5%), reflecting a concerted effort by the People’s Assembly to use Twitter to supplement its offline coalition-building strategy. This included original messages that mention other groups (e.g., trade unions, UK Uncut, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Student Assembly, Stand Up to Racism, Occupy Democracy and the Greece solidarity movement) as a way of displaying solidarity (Hodder & Houghton, 2015, p. 183) or retweeting their messages as a vehicle for displaying approval and bonding (Mercea & Yilmaz, 2018, p. 24). Unsurprisingly, given the organisational form of the People’s Assembly discussed earlier, a substantial number of tweets (13.8%) advertised grassroots meetings in local assembly groups as well as the assembly, the Women’s Assembly Against Austerity conference, the annual delegate conference of the People’s Assembly, the People’s Question Time events and the Austerity Myth events.

The last significant aspect of Twitter activity was news dissemination (10.7%). Tweets that promoted links to articles and video reportage published by the People’s Assembly on their website typically reflected on the necessity and moral justification of mass mobilisations, and the anti-austerity movements’ tactics, successes and failures. Instructive examples of headlines include: ‘Proud of the NHS’ (16 June 2014), ‘Education Cuts: Evident at All Levels’ (23 April 2015), ‘7 Reasons to Demonstrate on June 20—What Will You be Marching For?’ (13 June 2015). With regard to tweets sharing links to external news articles, these were most often published by the *Guardian*, *The Independent*, *Huffington Post* or *The Morning Star*, and tended to highlight the alarming impact of cuts on people’s lives.

Turning to the least prevalent uses of Twitter, the results show that only a very small amount of activity was dedicated to recruitment (3%) and fundraising (2.8%). Diagnostic tweets (1.8%), which typically focused on the injustice of austerity politics, were even rarer as were prognostic tweets (1%), which typically focused on tactics. This reflects the limited amount of 140 characters that are available for an individual tweet (changed to 280 characters in 2017), which make it a poorly suited medium for this type of framing, which largely took place during grassroots meetings and in long-form articles written by activists for the People’s Assembly website. Finally, frame bridging tweets that sought to link calls for redistribution with other political struggles such as antiracism were the least common among all the categories used to code the data (0.4%).

No more austerity: Demand the alternative (20 June 2014)

The first national demonstration began outside the BBC’s headquarters in central London, after which, an estimated 50,000 people marched to Parliament square. Here they heard Jeremy Corbyn (Labour MP), Caroline Lucas (Green MP) and Len McCluskey (Unite), among others, give speeches that challenged the need for cuts in welfare state spending, the privatisation of the NHS, and the scapegoating of migrants and asylum seekers in the media, and demanded that the government help young people suffering from unemployment, underemployment,

zero-hours contracts and low wages. For the first time, a speech was also given by the celebrity Russell Brand, whose Twitter account had a whopping 12.1 million followers—almost one hundred times more followers than all of the top 11 TUC-affiliated unions had at the time combined.

At a moment when media coverage of austerity in the *Daily Mail*, *The Sun*, *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Daily Mirror* still drew heavily on a neoliberal discourse (Temple, 2016), Brand's participation in the demonstration raised its media profile dramatically. His invitation to stage a joyful revolution was featured in many headlines: 'Russell Brand Calls on 50,000 Protesters to Stage Joyful Revolution' (*Huffington Post*, 21 June 2014), 'Russell Brand calls for Joyful Revolution' (Sky News, 21 June 2014), 'Russell Brand calls for Joyful Revolution as Protesters March in Westminster' (*Sunday Express*, 21 June 2014). The single most important article was one published in *The Guardian*, which featured a picture of Brand, and went viral. Titled 'Tens of Thousands March in London Against Coalition's Austerity Measures' (Rawlinson, 2014), the article was shared a remarkable 230,000 times on Facebook, tweeted 3500 times on Twitter and generated over 2000 comments. However, despite this, the BBC produced no live news coverage of the demonstration. So the day after activists on Twitter framed the BBC's disinterest as negligence of their public duty and initiated an online campaign, which led to over a thousand people registering complaints. Responding to this pressure, the BBC eventually published a short news piece.

The inability of the People's Assembly to get substantial media coverage from the BBC gave rise to a novel media tactic: creating an alternative to the BBC's Question Time show (with approx. 2.7 million viewers) in which guests from the world of politics and the media answer questions posed by members of the audience. According to one of the National Organisers of the People's Assembly, the aim was to get people 'asking the BBC why they are ignoring questions about austerity and the impact that it is having on our communities'. The first event was held in October 2014 and featured a panel with Mark Serwotka (PCS), Steve Turner (Unite), John Rees (Counterfire), Natalie Bennet (Leader of the Green Party) and Russell Brand. After its surprising success (1300 people in attendance), the People's Assembly decided to roll the event out across the country and held People's Question Times in Newcastle, Manchester, Bristol, Southampton, Doncaster, York, Norwich, Cardiff and the West Midlands, among other cities. The events were livestreamed and collective viewings were organised by local assemblies. People unable to attend were invited to participate through Twitter and tweet the hashtag #People's QT and #BBCQT.

End austerity now (20 June 2015)

In the run-up to the 2015 general election, the People's Assembly chose not to campaign directly around the election because it was viewed as an incredibly divisive time. Instead, as the Chair of the People's Assembly put it, 'we decided to organise the June 20 demonstration as our intervention because it was either Miliband's version of austerity-lite or Cameron's Conservative government that planned to continue with austerity'.

This proved to be a crucial strategic decision. On 7 May 2015, the Labour party lost the general election in a shock upset which allowed the Conservatives to form a majority government (330 seats to Conservatives, 232 to Labour and 56 to the Scottish National Party). Despite concern within the People's Assembly that it would be difficult to mobilise, the National Secretary recalled how they were able to capture everyone's discontent: 'What

we instantly did in that moment was to promote the June 20 demo and say, don't mourn, organise, up and down the country, and it just went mad on social media'. The following tweets illustrate the 'don't mourn, organise' frame being used on Twitter.

'People are angry, they're going on a march to protest against the Tories. RT if you agree. #EndAusterityNow' (8 May 2015, 145 retweets and 472 favourites)

'It's going to be an almighty Demo! We urge u: Don't mourn-Organise. Power to the People #EndAusterityNow #JuneDemo' (9 May 2015, 75 retweets and 202 favourites)

'RT @GeorgeAylett: Don't mourn-organise. We must carry on the fight. Join me on the march against austerity on the 20th June' (9 May 2015, 263 retweets and 481 favourites)

In the meantime, Ed Miliband's resignation had triggered a leadership contest and a squabble between the right and left of the Labour Party over who and what was to blame, and what was to be done. On May 15, a group of new left-wing MPs decided to make an intervention, publishing a letter in *The Guardian* (15 May 2015) calling for 'a new leader who looks forward and will challenge an agenda of cuts, take on big business and will set out an alternative to austerity'. After which an online petition for an 'anti-austerity' Labour Leader went live. On June 3, the veteran left-wing MP Corbyn decided to run for the leadership to offer an alternative, and after a remarkable grassroots campaign, he succeeded in getting the 35 MPs needed to get on the ballot (out of 232 Labour MPs). The fundamental difference between this leadership contest and the last one was that the voting rules had changed: unions had given up a third of their electoral college, MPs had been stripped of their disproportionate voting weight (one-third), and a 'registered supporters scheme' had been introduced by which nonmembers could vote for £3 (Collins, 2014). Asked about the significance of these changes, 1 day before the national demonstration, the Treasurer of the People's Assembly stated that 'one of the things we will be suggesting at the demonstration tomorrow is that everyone registers to vote because Jeremy Corbyn is on the list and you really only need 50,000 votes to win'.

The second national People's Assembly demonstration—'End Austerity Now'—gathered an estimated 250,000 people in central London, sending a strong signal to both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party. This time the mass mobilisation received significant coverage in the media both before and during the event, with *The Guardian* (Milne, 2015) and *The Mirror* (Whitehouse, 2015) publicising it and covering it on the day (Khomami & Wyatt, 2015). On the weekend, these two national newspapers alone have a total readership of three million, and given their left-leaning editorial line, are more sympathetic and less likely to distort the event in their reportage. There were several likely reasons for the increase in media prominence: the postelection context, the fivefold increase in people participating compared to the year before, and the involvement of new celebrities such as Charlotte Church who participated in the People's Assembly press conference.

As with all the other actions orchestrated by the People's Assembly, the Twitter account was used to publicise the speeches at the demonstration, one of which was given by the hopeful Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. From the vantage point of the Chair of the People's Assembly and the Assistant General Secretary of Unite, Corbyn's speech (just 5 days after his successful nomination) provided his campaign with pivotal exposure and momentum. Although Corbyn did not ask anyone to vote for him, both the general secretaries of PCS and Unite endorsed him and called for people to register as supporters to vote for him.

The remarkable victory of Jeremy Corbyn

Three months later, Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader of the Labour Party on a distinctly anti-austerity agenda with 59.5% of valid votes cast. A breakdown of the voting demonstrates that he

outperformed his opponents in all three electoral groups: members, registered supporters and affiliated supporters (see Table 3). In light of the results presented in this section, there is ample evidence that one of the factors crucial to Corbyn's success was the mass mobilisations of the People's Assembly (as well as the actions of other smaller groups).⁴ These helped create an environment in which millions of people became aware of an alternative to austerity policies, and in doing so, became more likely to support political activity in that direction. As Nunns (2016) points out, Corbyn's candidacy for leader of the Labour Party presented the anti-austerity movement with a sudden opportunity to express itself within the party. With Corbyn as the new leader, the British trade union movement had succeeded in cementing the anti-austerity agenda within the Labour Party, and as a result of receiving the backing of a major political party, alternatives to austerity gained much greater visibility and legitimacy in the mainstream media (Schifferes & Knowles, 2018, p. 27).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates that combining coalitional and discursive power is a combustible mix that played a crucial role in helping the British trade union movement to challenge the austerity consensus and get Jeremy Corbyn elected leader of the Labour Party. So how was this achieved? To build and sustain the power of a heterogeneous coalition, the People's Assembly relied upon a policy of nonpartisanship and a consensus-driven decentralised network orchestrated by a national organisation with substantial trade union involvement. Offline coalition-building was also supported by the use of Twitter for engaging with other groups online and advertising meetings in the various organisational bodies. Furthermore, Twitter and other social media were used to organise, promote and share audio-visual content of the two main mass mobilisations—'No More Austerity' (June 2014) and 'End Austerity Now' (June 2015)—which succeeded in circulating the anti-austerity message to a mass audience by generating mainstream media coverage and going viral online. In this sense, the synergy between offline grassroots organising and the use of new ICTs was vital to strengthen the discursive power of the People's Assembly. These conclusions echo those of Pasquier et al. (2020) and Wood (2015) who have studied the highly innovative FF15 movement and the OUR Walmart campaign in the US.

In the post-2015 context, the subsequent rise of Momentum—a political organisation created to win elections for Labour, to create a socialist Labour government and to democratise party structures—led much of the vitality of the People's Assembly to be absorbed into Labour Party politics (Mercea & Levy, 2019, p. 22). Momentum also began receiving more funding, more political backing and more media interest than the People's Assembly (Mercea & Levy, 2019, p. 22). The strategy and tactics of the People's Assembly have nevertheless remained in place during the past seven years, and their activities during this period deserve investigation. Under Corbyn's leadership, British trade unions regained their ability to exercise high levels of influence on Labour Party policy; for example, both the 2017 and 2019 Labour general election manifestos promised a return to sector-wide collective bargaining across the economy—one of the many recommendations of the Institute for Employment Rights, a trade

⁴The two other factors crucial to Corbyn's election were official trade union endorsements, donations and organisational support to help encourage union members to vote (e.g., Unite's sophisticated phone-bank initiative), and the historical left-ward shift within the membership of the Labour Party.

TABLE 3 Labour Party leadership results

	Members	%	Registered supporters	%	Affiliated supporters	%	Total	% of valid vote
CORBYN, Jeremy	121,751	49.6	88,449	83.8	41,217	57.6	251,417	59.5
BURNHAM, Andy	55,698	22.7	6160	5.8	18,604	26	80,462	19.0
COOPER, Yvette	54,470	22.2	8415	8	9,043	12.6	71,928	17.0
KENDALL, Liz	13,601	5.5	2574	2.4	2,682	3.7	18,857	4.5
Total	245,520		105,598		71,546		422,664	

Source: BBC (2015).

union-funded think tank. Ultimately, though, this renewed alliance between unions and the Labour Party failed in winning either election and since the new leadership of Keir Starmer in 2020, it has once again become contentious.

Theoretically, the main contribution of this article is to redefine the concept of discursive power; namely, as the capacity of trade unions to influence the public debate by producing and self-mediating frames, and circulating them through the mainstream media, Internet and social media to a mass audience. The value of this effort is premised upon two observations. First, references to media and communication in industrial relations theory are vague, and therefore overlook the means through which the trade union movement attempts to influence public debate in the digital age. Second, the way discursive power is theorised has never been revised in light of the small but growing empirical literature on the use of the Internet and social media by the trade union movement. Thus, by redefining our understanding of discursive power to include the four key communication processes involved (see Figure 1), scholars are now better equipped to grasp *how* the trade union movement tries to influence public debate.

To fully appreciate the significance of this redefinition of discursive power, it is useful to turn to the global crisis of human-induced climate change and environmental degradation. This has generated widespread and politically contentious discussion about the green transition, which will shape the jobs and industries that will exist in the future, and begs the question: how is the trade union movement using its discursive power to position itself in this debate? Using the new theoretical lens developed in this article, one could begin by examining the *production* of frames—be it in individual trade unions, confederations or coalitions—and the efforts to legitimise their strategies for a just and sustainable future. One could then trace how they *self-mediate* these frames directly through the Internet and social media, or indirectly through the mainstream media which is often supportive of employers and the state. The final step could be to consider *media representations* of the role of trade unions in the green transition, and ultimately to assess the *reception* of union frames by a diverse mass audience. Only by adopting such a multilevel, and inevitably multimethod and interdisciplinary approach, can one truly grasp how frames, and the communication processes through which they are circulated, become a crucial source of trade union power.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

ORCID

Torsten Geelan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2241-3407>

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