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Germany: spotlight on increasing rising use of social media by company works councils

By Marion Leo

The Amazon-verdi blog, the Obi-verdi blog, Siemens Dialog, Schaeffler-Nachrichten, ..., German company works councils are increasingly turning to the different social media (blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and even WhatsApp) to communicate both internally and externally on company work conditions and other work-related issues. Modern communications tools deliver employee representatives a broader range of opportunities to quickly and easily inform staff, reach new worker groups, campaign for public awareness, shape public opinion. Social media also carries a number of risks because works councils have to comply with confidentiality requirements. Ute Demuth, who for twenty years has been advising and training works councils on social media use, sat down with Planet Labor to discuss the positive opportunities and the risks social media hold for works councils.

Amazon's digital battle. Since 2011 Amazon employees and members of the Verdi union have been keeping and updating a blogsite (www.amazon-verdi.de) as a way of making the public aware and updated on progress as regards their longstanding struggle to secure better working conditions and a collective agreement. The blog has met with some success as every 15 seconds someone's face displays on the top right hand corner of the blog page in support of the employees' cause (Verdi members as well as private individuals and elected representatives). Directly under the images site visitors can sign a petition calling on Amazon boss, Jeff Besos, to treat employees fairly. The blog also has a comments section where the authors can chat to other Amazon employees and the content can become quite contentious, e.g. one employee who held the view that Verdi exaggerates and seeks to divide staff commented, 'We, Amazon's employees will continue to fight Verdi with every ounce of our strength.' Amazon bosses are not taking the digital battle lying down and present themselves in their own blog as the 'model employer' (<https://blog.aboutamazon.de>). The site nonetheless does not allow feedback from articles the company posts. Aside from their own blog, Amazon employees who are Verdi members also regularly contribute and update a Facebook page (www.facebook.com/verdi.bei.amazon/) that currently has 3,500 followers.

A deep well of opportunities. The Amazon case is not unique. Ute Demuth, digital public relations specialist, remarks that works councils (WC), for example, Mercedes, Bosch-Rexroth, Covestro, and Obi are increasingly discovering the virtues of social media and are using these avenues as part of their public relations efforts. In addition Ute Demuth remarks that the bigger the company and the more the company leaders are open to these new forms of communications (Continental, Siemens, and Bosch for example have set up their own social networks to facilitate intra-company communication), the more employee representatives are ready to seek out social media without leaving aside traditional tried and trusted communications instruments (newspapers, company posters,). Social media carry several advantages one of which is that ' WCs can inform public opinion, i.e. its clients, of their working conditions and secure their clients' support,' stated Ms. Demuth. Within companies new social media tools such as Facebook in particular help WCs reach new employee groups, especially the younger cohorts that are less likely to read the WC print publications. These new media are also a lot easier to manage. Another advantage is that it is a lot easier to reach employees who are normally difficult to contact (posted and shift workers, employees working outside the company, e.g. bus drivers). For example, employee representatives (Personalrat) at the Essen University Clinic (<https://www.facebook.com/PersonalratAmUniklinikumEssen>) publish a weekly video podcast on YouTube and Facebook that gives the results of their meetings. Above all social media allow dialogue to be established with staff. "The internet is a two-way street. No longer is sending out a message enough. The comment section enables feedback. The WC can get instant feedback from the community it represents. This is transparent and makes our job easier because we have a better understanding of what are colleagues are looking for,' explained Timm Bossmann, WC member at publishing company Weltbild, which was one of the first to have set up a blog back in 2009 (<http://weltbild-verdi.blogspot.com>).

Legal issues. WCs do have to take care however because they are required to comply with various requirements including working with employers from within 'an environment of trust', and upholding 'a duty of confidentiality' (§79 Betriebsverfassungsgesetz – Law on internal company constitution). "I don't think that bad working conditions constitute a company secret; and as such we have the right to talk about this in a blog," argues Timm Bossmann, before clarifying, "however we don't have to talk about bad working conditions from the platform of a member of the WC. I recommend that blogsites associate with trade unions just like we do." In effect all trade union member employee representative blogsites and Facebook pages feature the trade union name in their title names and impressum sections (Ed. note- legal notices required in Germany), so it is the trade union that bears the responsibility for any disputes with company management. Employees and WCs that express an opinion are thus better protected. For Ute Demuth the question of whether or not a WC is authorized to provide information to the general public about its work is a controversial issue in legal terms and can only be resolved on a case-by-case basis. More generally, WCs have the right to express themselves publicly, because free speech also applies to WCs. "However this does not mean that they can say whatever they like," she cautions. One thing that is certain is that information provided by WCs has to be verifiable.

A clear strategy and calm in the face of malicious comment. Time consuming social media use requires the implementation of 'coherent strategies' (e.g. what are the objectives- to attract younger audiences? To launch a campaign?), 'appropriate organization and clear coordination' adds Ms. Demuth, who takes as a prime example the Covestro WC, (one of the world's major polymer material suppliers and created from Bayer's former plastics division). Present on Twitter and Facebook since 205 and on YouTube since 2016 the Covestro WC (all the WC members are affiliated with the chemicals IG BCE union) set up a 7 member editorial team that meets monthly to define the major themes for posting (upcoming demonstrations, major campaigns, for example ahead of collective negotiations, the Messe K Plastics Fair, etc.). Social media demands speed and agility and so a 4 member team also surfs the online news landscape every morning for between 10 and 20 minutes and then posts relevant information on Twitter and Facebook including Covestro relevant news, new about the IG BCE trade union, regional information, traffic alerts, and so on. "We get very positive feedback and some staff have opened Twitter accounts just to stay in the loop," explained

the WC in an interview before adding that the IG BCE union as employees in other companies also appreciate the updates. "Obviously we are sometimes on the receiving end of malicious comments. However we don't get very many and they are always from the same people. We keep the comments up unless they contain insults and we reply clearly and objectively," the WC continued adding that sometimes it suggests contacting the disgruntled commentator by telephone or having a face-to-face meeting. "We are talking about our colleagues here so why not talk to someone who vehemently disagrees with you? This is how we get to better understand other peoples' viewpoints." Ms. Demuth concludes, "Its important not to panic in the face of aggressive comments and to be confident and maintain trust."

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If you have any questions or comments on this dispatch, please contact Editor at +33 (0) 1 47 20 42 17 or by sending an email to planetlabor@planetlabor.com
