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Understanding Faculty Association Communication Strategies During Strike Action: Themes and Recommendations from the Canadian Strike Wave of 2021-22

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ABSTRACT

In 2021-22 there were an unprecedented six faculty association strikes across Canada. These strike actions took place during a period of crisis and transition in Canadian news industry. The consolidation of traditional media outlets meant that these venues were even less reliable for the extensive or effective coverage of the strikes, trends in post-secondary education, or faculty experiences as workers. Concurrently, the proliferation of social media platforms allowed faculty associations to reach audiences directly, bypassing the traditional news media. This paper presents results of our study of Canadian faculty associations' communication strategies in this period of transformation in Canadian media structures. Based on interviews with members of the communications teams of faculty associations on strike in 2021-22, we identified three key issues that communications teams grappled with during their strikes: the "neutral" approach of the traditional media, a concern with maintaining professionalism and transparency, and the increasing need to use social media to reach important stakeholders. We conclude that although communicating with members remains the most critical task for faculty associations' communications teams during negotiations and job action, it is a benefit to overall support to have robust external communications as well. In an ever-changing media environment, this means focusing on communications strategies well before beginning the bargaining process.

Keywords: Faculty associations, faculty strikes, labour media, union communications

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INTRODUCTION

During the 2021-22 academic year, an unprecedented six faculty associations across Canada took strike action. According to David Robinson, the Executive Director of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), there were as many faculty strikes in 2021-22 as there were in the previous six years combined (Robinson 2022; see also Figure 1).[1] The 2021-22 strikes occurred in universities across four different provinces—Alberta, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, and Ontario—and with associations ranging in size from under 100 members, such as Concordia University of Edmonton Faculty Association and the Association des professeurs, professeures, et bibliotécaires de l'Université Sainte-Anne, to those with over 1000, such as the University of Manitoba Faculty Association.

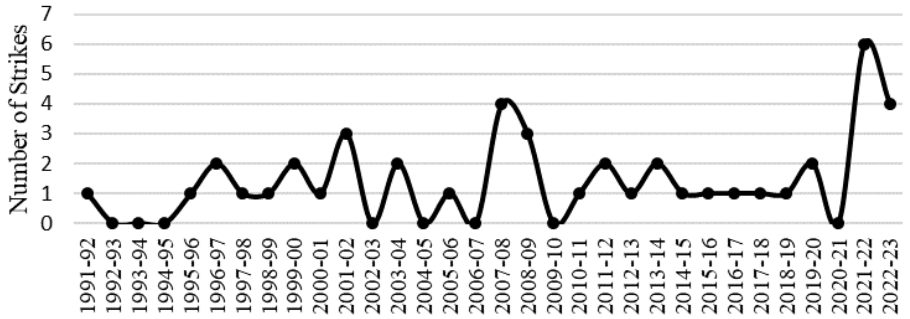

Figure 1: CAUT Member Faculty Strikes in Canada by Year from 1991-92 to 2022-23

Note. Compiled from data obtained by CAUT (2023). Data include only strikes by CAUT member faculty associations over the past 30-years.

In the lead up to and during any job action, unions must invest considerable effort into their communications with members, other affected groups (like other university staff, and students and their parents, in the case of university strikes), and the broader public. Communicating a message about the factors driving job action to an external audience is a challenging task for labour unions in part because, as scholars have long noted, media coverage of labour tends to be limited to periods of job action and/or biased in favor of the employer (Soron 2018; Gunster 2008; Parenti 1993; Puette 1992). But it remains an important task, as member solidarity can be bolstered by having negotiating demands and strike action reflected accurately and positively in external media. Beyond this longstanding challenge, the 2021-22 strike wave took place in a rapidly changing media context. On one hand, structural changes in the legacy media in Canada have led to a concentration of ownership, closure of local papers, and layoffs of journalists (Lindgren and Corbett 2023; Taylor and DeCillia 2021; Gill 2016). As a result of these changes, there are fewer journalists hired to provide in-depth coverage of important beats, including labour and education, leaving the legacy media ill-equipped to cover these beats from the perspectives of workers and their communities. On the other hand, social media increasingly offer individuals and organizations—including labour unions—the opportunity to bypass gatekeepers in the legacy media and reach out directly to targeted audiences (Shirky

[1] The increase in strikes observed in 2021-22 may have stemmed in part from the number of contracts that were negotiated that year, which was higher than normal due to several 1-year contract rollovers in 2020-21 during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. But this is unlikely to be the whole explanation considering that the following (2022-23) academic year seven faculty unions (four CAUT members and three CUPE locals) in Canada went on strike. And although we have seen other strike waves during the past 30 years (e.g., 2007-09), the wave beginning in 2021-22 is orders of magnitude larger. For context, collective bargaining data collected by Employment and Social Development Canada shows that the annual number of strikes in the 2021-23 period was about 50% higher than in the last three years pre-Covid-19 (2017-19). Thus, the increased strike trend extended beyond the post-secondary sector.

2008). This changing media landscape has made faculty associations' external communications a very different enterprise from what they were even a decade ago.

We are members of the Acadia University Faculty Association (AUFA), one of the six faculty associations that engaged in a strike in 2021-22. Each of us participated in union communications during our strike in February 2022 (Biro was president of the Association, while Brickner and Hayes were on the Communications Team). Additionally, two of us (Biro and Brickner) played key communications roles in previous negotiations. The changing media landscape forced our faculty association to alter its communications strategies from previous negotiations. We wondered if our experience mirrored or differed from the experience of other faculty associations on strike in the same year. To analyze this question more systematically, we explored how faculty associations adapted, explicitly or not, to the changing Canadian media landscape to tell their version of the story behind their respective strikes.

In the analysis that follows, we present findings based on 13 semi-structured interviews with members of communications teams of five of the six striking faculty associations. We discuss themes that emerged about the nature of coverage in the traditional media, the importance of professionalism and transparency in communications, and the increased importance of social media—especially in communicating with students. We conclude that although communicating with members remains the most critical task for faculty associations' communications teams during negotiations and job action, it is a benefit to overall support to have robust external communications as well. In an ever-changing media environment, this means focusing on communications strategies well before beginning the bargaining process.

FACULTY ASSOCIATION COMMUNICATIONS IN A CHANGING MEDIA LANDSCAPE

The 2021-22 wave of labour militancy in Canada's post-secondary sector occurred during an ongoing period of crisis and transition in the Canadian news industry, which has been characterized in part by the closure and consolidation of newspapers and a corresponding decline in the number of journalists working in news media (Lindgren and Corbett 2023; Taylor and DeCillia 2021; Gill 2016). Local and regional news operations have been particularly hard hit during this period. According to *Local News Map Data*, a crowdsourced project tracking changes in local news operations in Canada, 482 local news operations in 338 communities closed between 2008 and August 2023. During the same period, 216 local news operations launched in 154 communities, leaving a net loss of 266 news operations in 184 Canadian communities (Lindgren and Corbett 2023, 3). The net loss of local news operations exacerbates existing disparities in access to news media between urban and rural communities, as well as those in the North (Taylor and DeCillia 2021, 48).

As news operations close, jobs in journalism are lost.[2] At the time of writing, NordStar, the company that owns the *Toronto Star*, announced that it would be laying off about 600 people at 70 local papers and moving those papers online as part of the bankruptcy process for its Metroland Media Group division (Canadian Press 2023). With fewer reporters, news operations are relying more on newswire services like the Canadian Press for content (Taylor and DeCillia 2021, 55). Lost journalism jobs mean communities lose the skills of professionals "who are trained to gather and interpret facts and create valuable, intelligent news and analysis," as noted by the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage (quoted in Taylor and DeCillia 2021, 53). This has a particularly important impact at the local level. In their analysis of "local news poverty," Lindgren, Corbett, and Hodson (2017) emphasize the importance of robust local news coverage in providing "critical information" that allows citizens to engage in civic and political life.

[2] It is notable that, according to Statistics Canada, there are more Canadians employed in public relations than in journalism by a ratio of 9:1 (Leedham 2023).

Structural changes to the news media have profound implications in part because of how Canadians follow the news. Television broadcasts, newspaper websites, and TV news websites are top sources of news (Charlton and Brin 2023; Maru Public Opinion 2022; Taylor and DeCillia 2021; Statistics Canada 2023), although Canadians in the 18-34 demographic are more likely to access the news via social media outlets than their older counterparts (Maru 2022). Data from the 2023 Digital News Report survey shows that, with the exception of Twitter, which held steady, use of social media platforms to access news declined overall from 2022 to 2023 (Charlton and Brin 2023). This decline was in progress even before Meta stopped linking to Canadian news sites on Facebook and Instagram in response to Bill C-18, which will require digital tech companies to compensate news producers for content (Mundie 2023).[3] While there are a number of digital news start-ups, these have small and specialized audiences (Taylor and DeCillia 2023). The upshot is that Canadians are relying for news on a media industry with fewer news operations covering local issues and fewer reporters covering fewer news beats in depth.

More specifically, these structural changes to the Canadian news media have left it ill-equipped to provide effective coverage of labour issues from the perspective of workers and their communities. Research has long shown that coverage of labour has tended to focus on periods of job action and has tended to be presented in pro-business and pro-consumer frames (Soron 2018; Gunster 2008; Park and Wright 2007; Puette 1992). However, the closure of local news operations and decline in the number of reporters has other important effects. First, in her analysis of recent Canadian strike coverage, Emily Leedham (2023) notes that in the absence of robust reporting, strike coverage is largely shaped by statements from union and employer communications teams. Leedham (2023) observes that "in many cases, strike coverage becomes a battle of dueling press releases," which may benefit the employer in cases where they have more resources to spend on public relations than the union.[4] She further notes that pro-business lobby groups are well placed to amplify employer perspectives with op-eds (Leedham 2023). This is an important consideration in Canada, where corporate owners of Postmedia, the country's largest newspaper chain, insist on a conservative editorial perspective across their national and regional/local dailies (Taylor and DeCillia 2021, 57).

A second important implication of media restructuring on labour reporting relates to the decline in the number of local papers. Leedham (2023) notes that smaller strikes are usually initially covered by local press and sometimes picked up by the national media. If local media operations close, or reporters are stretched thin because of layoffs, the likelihood of strikes being covered declines at both local and national scales. A decline in any strike coverage is important because, as Leedham (2023) notes, although many unionists want to see more than strikes covered, "we lose the big picture of what working class life in Canada is like when these stories are not told." It is in this broader media context that the post-secondary union strike wave of 2021-22 took place: consolidation and layoffs have left fewer local news operations with fewer reporters. This has left union communications teams with a more important and more challenging role in telling the story of their strike to a public that remains generally reliant on traditional

[3] The Online News Act (C-18), passed in June 2023, requires large digital platform companies (Meta, Google, etc.) to pay Canadian news providers when journalistic content from those providers is posted on their platforms. In the summer of 2023, while the guidelines for implementing the legislation were being developed, Meta announced that news content (including from international as well as Canadian sources) would be blocked for Canadian users of Facebook and Instagram, and Canadian users would no longer be able to view or post news content. The legislation went into effect in December 2023 and as of this writing Meta's news ban has continued (Krichel 2023; Mundie 2023).

[4] A question to explore further, but which is beyond the scope of our study, is whether this mismatch is less pronounced at public universities, where university administrations could face public pressure about spending on public relations and, as is especially the case at smaller universities, striking employees have close connections with the community.

media for their news—except for the student-age demographic, which engages more regularly with social media.

At the same time, and albeit with less dramatic effect than in the news industry, universities in Canada have been undergoing similar processes of neoliberalization. Ross, Savage, and Watson (2022) succinctly describe this as a reorientation "away from serving the needs of society, broadly speaking, to focus more narrowly on serving the needs of the market" (227). More specifically, Ross and Savage (2021) describe this process as one that sees "the growing use of market-based practices, criteria and cultural norms to organize the university and judge the success of its components" (499) along with a "fragmentation of academic labour" (502). Unionization rates among university faculty in Canada are very high (Dobbie and Robinson 2008), and as Savage (2022) notes, "academic staff associations potentially represent a significant brake on the power of university boards and administrations to advance neoliberal goals and objectives" (23). The increase in post-secondary strikes may be related to the pandemic's increased workload demands and sudden declines in university revenues, which came at a time when decades of neoliberal governance had already exerted significant pressures on universities, in Canada as in many other countries (Bozheva, 2020; Ross, Savage, and Watson 2022). While some recent attention has been paid to faculty unions' strategies for organizing and bargaining (Maton 2024; Ross, Savage, and Watson 2022; Savage 2022), relatively little has been paid to how faculty unions have sought to communicate their messages, particularly to audiences beyond their own membership.

OUR STUDY

To answer the question of how faculty associations have adapted to the new media environment, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with members of communications teams from five of the Canadian faculty associations that carried out strikes during the 2021-22 academic year. These faculty associations included the Acadia University Faculty Association (AUFA), Association des professeurs, professeures, et bibliotécaires de l'Université Sainte Anne (APPBUSA), Concordia University of Edmonton Faculty Association (CUEFA), University of Lethbridge Faculty Association (ULFA), and University of Manitoba Faculty Association (UMFA). We reached out to members of each faculty association's communications team by sending an email to the association president and/or spokesperson with a request that they connect us to members of the communications team. We received an enthusiastic response from representatives of five of the six faculty associations who engaged in strike action in the 2021-22 academic year. The University of Ontario Institute of Technology Faculty Association is the only faculty association from which we were not able to find at least one interviewee.

We conducted a total of 13 interviews. In these interviews, we asked participants to comment on a range of issues, including strategies for reaching key constituencies; use of social media; key messages and issue framing; portrayal of the faculty association and strike in the traditional media; and how the faculty association responded to communications from university administrations and/or negative press.[5] All interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, and we used the recording and transcription features of Teams. We analyzed the transcripts looking for dominant themes. Three themes emerged from this analysis, including the "neutral" approach of the traditional news media, which allows faculty associations to present a relatively unfiltered message to the broader public; a concern with maintaining a professional tone and being accountable to parties affected by the strike (especially members, students, and their parents); and

[5] Because our interviews were with members of communications teams and not with bargaining team and union executive members, we did not ask questions about the content of bargaining demands, negotiating strategy, or broader union policies or approaches (e.g. service union approaches vs common good bargaining). While these are important issues that can affect the choice or effectiveness of particular communication tactics, the nature of our study is such that we cannot draw broad conclusions around these questions of what faculty associations should push for and how.

the increasing importance of social media. Additionally, we developed a picture of the composition and practices of the communications teams themselves. We discuss the teams and dominant themes below.

COMPOSITION AND PROCESSES OF THE FACULTY ASSOCIATION COMMUNICATIONS TEAMS

Our interviews showed that communications teams' composition and processes were similar in many ways. Most teams had between 5-10 active members. The exception was ULFA, whose team absorbed members needing alternatives to picket duty and grew to over 50 members during their strike. It was common for teams to have some division of labour. For example, all teams had designated member(s) serving as the spokesperson(s). Most also included representatives from their association's executive board and/or negotiating team. In smaller associations, these members often did double duty as the spokesperson. Another similarity was that, except for writing press releases, members of communications teams were typically not trained by the committee or association in the skills required of them for communications work. Participants from all five associations told us that members were recruited for the teams or took on their roles based on the skills they already had in areas such as web design, social media, infographics, bilingualism, and formal written communications. Participants told us that some members of their teams attended the workshop offered by CAUT focusing on press releases, but as we discuss in our conclusion, the need for more networking with CAUT and other organizations was a common reflection.

There were also significant differences between the teams. Although there was some division of labour within teams, the rigidity of roles varied. Some associations assigned members to clearly designated roles, such as working on press releases, social media, and internal communications. Other associations had a looser structure, with members taking on roles they felt comfortable with. The process of communications work also differed. For some teams, the press release played a more central role than in others. For example, a member from CUEFA told us that they would begin with a press release and derive their social media messages from that content (CUEFA 2). There were also differences in relative autonomy given to members. Participants from AUFA commented on their team's practice of collectively vetting all their content to maintain a professional tone. Such a practice would have been impossible in a committee as large as ULFA's. There, committee leaders used a spreadsheet to manage workflow of the different working groups (ULFA 1). Despite differences in committee structure, however, some common themes emerged in our interviews.

Dominant Themes

The nature of coverage in the traditional media

Engaging with the traditional news media was important for all five of the faculty associations. The primary purpose of engaging with the traditional media was to ensure that the faculty association could make their case to the general population, although, as we discuss below, the goal was not simply to win over (a majority of) the general public. Rather, public approval (or positive media coverage) was understood as a tool for maintaining solidarity and morale within the union: positive representations of the strike provided external validation that could help sustain members' belief that their decision to walk off the job was the right one.

In some cases, traditional media coverage was also seen as a route to communicate with the provincial government. This was an important consideration for the communications team of APPBUSA, which represents faculty at Université Ste Anne, the lone francophone university in Nova Scotia. One participant[6] from APPBUSA felt that coverage in the English language media was important because most of the

[6] We use gender neutral phrases and pronouns where required to maintain the confidentiality of our participants.

provincial government is anglophone (APPBUSA 1). Similarly, one participant from UMFA told us that their strike was an extension of disputes with both the employer and the Manitoba government dating back to 2016. They picketed at the Manitoba legislature in part to make the politics explicit and expected the political angle of the strike to be covered in the media (UMFA 1).

Regardless of the precise motivations for engaging with the traditional media, there were several noticeable trends in coverage. First, there was little in-depth coverage of the strikes by the mainstream broadcast networks (CTV, CBC, Global) or even large-circulation daily newspapers, unless the strike was happening in the city where they were based. This was a particular challenge for universities in smaller centres. The coverage of the ULFA strike by Calgary and Edmonton papers, and of the AUFA and APPBUSA strikes by the *Halifax Chronicle-Herald*, was generally superficial. Participants told us that in general, reporters accurately conveyed the messages presented to them by the faculty associations and by the administration but did little investigative digging to critically interrogate claims (from either side) or to expose underlying issues. On one hand, this meant that the press releases issued, and interviews given, by faculty associations were presented in a relatively unfiltered way, giving the faculty associations platforms to present their messages to the broader public. One member of UMFA's communications team told us of the CBC's print coverage that "they certainly might write their own copy, but they were absolutely always taking our quotes 100% of the time, so [it was] definitely worth the investment to write those press releases [and] to have press contacts" (UMFA 1). On the other hand, statements to the press from university administrations were similarly presented in an unfiltered manner, even when they were inaccurate or misleading. These findings reflect Leedham's (2023) observation about the important role of "dueling" union and employer communications in media coverage of strikes. An implication of this, we argue, is that while media reports generally adhered to journalistic conventions of "balance" (presenting both sides of the dispute) they offer readers little guidance in terms of assessing the truthfulness of competing claims.

A second, related trend about traditional media reporting was that even though reporters presented both sides' views accurately, they also tended to emphasize the faculty associations' salary demands above other critical issues. Framing the dispute as being over salary issues may be a compelling frame for journalists for a couple of reasons. First, it is an issue that is easily understood by a broad audience. As one participant told us, "everyone makes it about money, and I understand why they do that because everyone understands money" (CUEFA 2). And second, competing proposals are easily reduced to a few simple numbers (e.g., the union is asking for a salary increase of X percent per year, the administration is offering Y percent). As such, it doesn't require the journalist to understand, and translate for a general audience, issues that are more specific to universities, such as the expectations of collegial governance, the number of full-time faculty ("faculty complement"), or hiring, tenure, and promotion processes. Another participant told us, "If you're talking about the importance of faculty complement, that's something that's difficult to communicate in an 800-word article to a general audience" (AUFA 4).

For participants, this was frustrating and even demoralizing (UMFA 1). Although salary was a key negotiating issue for many faculty associations, focusing on salary demands obscures the many other issues that, from the faculty perspective, are critical to strengthening university education for students. For one AUFA member, "the media was really focused on wage increases, whereas what I cared about, or what other folks I knew cared about, were not those issues very much. So a lot of what we were [communicating was]: this isn't really the big thing. The big thing is rights for part-time employees or hiring [more diverse] scholars" (AUFA 3). Another AUFA participant noted that the media's focus on salary demands forced the communications team to use other forms of communication to discuss their other negotiating demands and their impact on the quality of the students' academic experience (AUFA 5). Other participants noted that the relatively high salaries of full-time faculty mean that strikes for more money are less likely to find sympathy in the eyes of the public, who might see professors as "overpaid brain trusts" (CUEFA 2). A participant from APPBUSA compared their work to other workers in southwestern Nova Scotia: "We are in a rural area where, granted they make a lot of money, [but] lobster fishermen… are risking their lives

fishing. And other people have jobs like gutting fish on the line. You know, I don't think we started with public sympathy. We work in warm, well-lit rooms" (APPBUSA 1). For this participant, among others, it was more important to focus on the quality of education and the strength of public institutions than on salaries.

While the major outlets offered basic, "both sides" coverage of the strikes, participants noted local media often provided better, more in-depth coverage of the issues. Participants speculated that this was because they had an interest in covering community issues and more resources to devote to them. According to a participant from UMFA, for example, the education reporter for the *Winnipeg Free Press* would report on issues that were not raised in the Association's press releases and always followed up on press releases, rather than reprint the copy like the other major outlets did (UMFA 1). A number of interviewees tied this to traditional media outlets' lack of resources as a result of corporate consolidation and downsizing. One participant from ULFA described the pattern of media coverage, saying that "the reporters from the larger [media] companies that have been conglomerated that have fewer resources, they might have a Calgary reporter who's been sent down for one day to Lethbridge.... [On the other hand,] the *Lethbridge Herald*, by and large, did a really good job. There was [sic] some missteps, but because the *Lethbridge Herald* is more locally controlled - it's not part of that big newspaper group that controls most of the dailies in the country,...it's got much more independence in what it writes about. And so we had fairly favourable coverage in that, better than you'd get out of the bigger centres, I think" (ULFA 2). As this participant states, both geographic locality and ownership structure seem to matter.

However, faculty associations still ran up against structural constraints when trying to get coverage from local media. For example, the local paper for APPBUSA, the *Yarmouth Vanguard*, is part of the Saltwire Network, which was formed in 2017 when the Dennis-Lever family (owners of the *Halifax Chronicle-Herald*) purchased many smaller-circulation newspapers across Atlantic Canada. Like other smaller papers in the Saltwire network (and similar conglomerates), *Vanguard* operations have been "rationalized" by downsizing—in this case, to the point where the paper simply lacked the capacity to cover events happening on Fridays. Lack of coverage on Fridays, the *Vanguard's* press day, meant that there was no coverage of the major rallies with "flying pickets" organized by the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT).[7] As an APPBUSA participant stated, "it took us a while to learn that the local media, their press day is Friday. So, finally we had a reporter tell us: 'you could have a flying elephant on a Friday, and I can't come, because I'm busy composing….' If Justin Bieber were singing for us on Friday, it would not have made the *Vanguard*" (APPBUSA 1).

In summary, our interviews reveal that engagement with the media was necessary from the perspective of faculty associations, but coverage, especially in the outlets that operate at larger scales (both geographic and financial), failed to go beyond "both sides" coverage that emphasized major points in the labour conflict, and with a particular emphasis on salaries. Communicating the structural issues at play and their impact on collegial governance and the academic experience had to be taken up through different means. Before discussing faculty associations use of social media, we first discuss the significance of professionalism, accountability, and transparency.

[7] CAUT is the umbrella organization of Canadian faculty associations. On Fridays during a member association's strike, CAUT pays for the cost of representatives from other faculty associations to join the pickets, lending national support to the local strikers. Visits of these "flying pickets" are an occasion for the local faculty association to organize special rallies and events, making Fridays a good day to encourage media coverage of the strike.

Professionalism, transparency, and accountability in communications with key audiences

Communications teams had to reach many different audiences. Whether communicating with members or with other important audiences, like students, a theme that emerged in our interviews was that communications teams were concerned with maintaining a professional tone and with being transparent and accountable to these different constituencies. This concern is not surprising, especially given a decades-long debate of whether (and how) the professional values of the professoriate—academic freedom, tenure, collegial governance, professional autonomy, and an obligation to students and the public—are compatible with collective bargaining (Reichman 2015; Butovsky, Savage, and Webber 2015). In the current phase of this debate, Ross, Savage, and Watson (2022) note that "Resistance to neoliberalization by traditional university faculty has been driven primarily by a sense of occupational, rather than class, consciousness" (242).

A participant from ULFA noted that the communications team thought about their audience in terms of concentric circles, with union members at the centre, then students and other members of the university community, and with the general public in the outermost circle (ULFA 2). All the participants in our study noted that their communications teams took their responsibility to members seriously. This included the importance of regular communications and responding to members' concerns. The work of reaching members varied over the course of negotiations and included providing information about negotiations through communiques, encouraging members to take action in support of the union, and keeping morale high during the stressful days of the strike. One example of this commitment to transparency when communicating with members came from a participant from UMFA, who told us that they fused communications with organizing, using data analytics software and careful messaging to ensure that members would receive email messages and be provided with opportunities to take action. This participant told us that when there were members with concerns about the union collecting data through software, even to improve communications, "we would use that as an opportunity to engage, and through that process and those conversations, sometimes they would bring up great points, like what's your data retention policy and how long are you keeping this stuff?" (UMFA 1).

Union communications teams' engagement with traditional media, as discussed in the previous section, was considered an important part of communications with members, and provides another example of how union communications teams responded professionally. Many participants noted that communications from the administration were often inaccurate or misleading. One participant from AUFA recalled that communications from the administration accused the faculty association of refusing to meet when the reverse was true. For this member, there was an initial desire for the public response to capture the anger felt by the members of the communications team, but all communications within the AUFA team were carefully vetted to maintain a professional tone. The AUFA participant told us, "I'm glad we didn't go down that road. We were restrained, and I think it was very effective. That came across to students and to our [social media audience]. And that paints us as reasonable people, right? And that fed into the overall message of, 'we just wanna have a conversation here. We're being quite reasonable'" (AUFA 1).

Even as communications teams strove for a professional tone in the media, their engagement was important in demonstrating their willingness to hold the university administration accountable. As noted above, positive coverage in the traditional media was often seen largely through the lens of its impact on members' morale. An UMFA participant shared that a lesson they had learned from their 2016 strike was that there was good reason to devote resources to positive coverage in the mainstream media. It was not for the sake of winning over the general public, but rather that "nothing gets our members more anxious than a negative news story" (UMFA 1). A participant from ULFA echoed the importance of their Association engaging in the traditional media because it can "have that empowering or motivational impact to be able to [allow

members to] see that yeah, our president or our negotiating team members are standing up for us in the press. And I think that helped the members as well" (ULFA 2).

The importance of maintaining a professional tone is also linked to the faculty associations' commitment to transparency and accountability to students and parents. Some participants, like those in AUFA, described their administrations as providing misleading communications that had to be refuted. Participants from other associations, like APPBUSA, CUEFA, and ULFA, described situations where the administrations simply stopped communicating with students over the course of the strike. In all these circumstances, while communication with union members remained important, the faculty associations' communications teams also took the role of communicating their positions and bargaining updates to external audiences seriously. Many participants described having regularly updated FAQs for students and parents. ULFA held multiple town halls for students and parents. Describing the role of these town halls, a member of ULFA's communications team told us, "we wanted to say we have nothing to hide. We're happy to be transparent, to answer all your questions, to receive your frustrations, if need be, because we understand this is frustrating. But to at least explain things to you then and to be transparent. And I think that that was really juxtaposed with those top down, very impersonal messages from the administration and how little transparency they were receiving there" (ULFA 1). The town hall example is illustrative of the work of communications teams' commitment to transparency and accountability in communicating with students and other constituencies. It is also illustrative of the innovative means faculty associations had to use to reach those students, since none had access to email lists or other university communications infrastructure that would reach all students. As we discuss in the next section, this made social media particularly important for communications.

The role of social media

The two themes we have just covered—that the mainstream media did relatively little investigative digging into either sides' claims, and that university administrations at least in some cases failed to present their case to the broader campus community and/or general public—meant that faculty associations had considerable opportunities to get their message out through the traditional media, more or less unopposed and unfiltered. While attributing some of it to good luck, a participant from CUEFA observed, "that first day [of the strike] our message came out crystal clear. The media picked up exactly what we wanted them to pick up. And we got coverage on TV, print, radio, etc. at the end of that first day, and it was all clearly pointing to us being 'in the right' in the situation, there was no ambiguity" (CUEFA 1).

At the same time, as we noted at the outset of this paper, the media environment has changed dramatically over the last couple of decades, and even within the last 5-10 years. Faculty association members are in the demographic groups more likely to use newspapers, magazines, and television to follow the news, but the same is not true for other audiences that faculty associations are trying to reach, especially students (Statistics Canada 2023). To reach students, in particular, faculty association communications teams devoted considerable resources to communicating on social media. A number of observations can be made about faculty associations' use of social media.

Every faculty association thought it was necessary to use social media to communicate with students. As a participant from UMFA told us of Instragram, "that's where the students were" (UMFA 1). Creating effective content for social media meant tailoring core messages that would be appropriate for the medium and resonate with the audience. A CUEFA participant told us that they started with the key messages from a press release and then tailored those for specific social media platforms. For example, an infographic created for Instagram "was a really effective tool because it took all the stuff we were describing in our main statement about spending choices and salaries and put it into a very clear image that compared things. Students learned things that they didn't know because they hadn't been told" (CUEFA 1).

Students also provided critical support during strikes by sharing social media content created by the faculty associations. One AUFA participant recalled that a supportive group of students "had an Instagram account before we had an Instagram account, I think…. And then once we started our Instagram account, they would repost what we were posting. And so, in that way it would help to amplify our message" (AUFA 4). Because faculty associations were cut off from communicating with students through university channels, which were controlled by administrations, social media was critical to disseminating information from the faculty associations' perspective.

The informal nature of social media forced faculty associations to find a balance between maintaining the professional tone expected by many members and embracing the possibilities for irreverence afforded by the different platforms. As students and other allies share information, they editorialize and may provide the more edgy "takes" that faculty associations generally don't want to do themselves. Internet memes, which many faculty associations employed, provide an example of this tension. Memes "really resonated with students," one UMFA participant told us (UMFA 1). But as an ULFA participant said, "some people thought the memes were the greatest thing and that they were pithy and effective and conversation starters, and other people...we got a lot of complaints [from people who] said they thought it was juvenile and inappropriate and hated it" (ULFA 1). This highlights the challenge faculty associations faced in communicating key messages to multiple constituencies over many media platforms, but also the importance of communications teams maintaining the professional tone described in the previous section.

Another key observation about social media is that, like so many other aspects of communications, its effective use is a particular skill that requires time and commitment. A social media audience needs to be built, and that is more effective when it is done in advance. The AUFA member who managed the Association's Twitter account noted that well ahead of the strike they "started doing social media campaigns that were unrelated directly to the strike but were related to AUFA in general. This was all strategic, in order to get more exposure—particularly to gain our followers and so people knew who we were prior to any job action that we might have. And that in effect did take place. Because when it comes to social media, a lot of people fall into the trap of not communicating anything until there's something to communicate. And the way that social media algorithms work is that you're not going to reach the audiences that you want to reach if you only do that…. For your information to show up in people's feeds, you basically have to constantly be engaging with the platforms" (AUFA 2).

At the same time, social media technologies and the popularity of different platforms are evolving very quickly. Several respondents related the difficulties of keeping up with the social media habits or preferences of current students. While faculty associations might have reached many students on Facebook in 2010 or on Twitter in 2015, few students can be reached on those platforms now. Instagram was used by several striking faculty associations in 2021-22. Participants from most associations noted that while they thought they should have been using Tik Tok to reach students, few, if any, did so, often citing the difficulty of learning to be conversant on a new platform. Here, too, there is a balance to be struck between maintaining a "professional" tone versus adopting the generic conventions of social media platforms that are designed to appeal to youth rather than (middle-aged) professionals. However, just as the networked nature of social media allows messages to be shared (sometimes with more edgy editorializing than unions would be comfortable providing themselves), it also allows content developed by faculty associations to be distributed on other platforms. As a participant from ULFA stated: "When it came to things like Tik Tok, I think that's where more students are. So it was important for reaching them. But that's where I think you can have those important relationships with students where they can distribute it there…. I didn't want to be the older millennial trying to learn Tik Tok just for this. But I thought I'll put it up on Twitter and if they want to take it and put it there, they can" (ULFA 1).

Overall, faculty associations viewed their communications strategies on social media as effective. One of the managers of AUFA's Instagram feed kept tabs on metrics and student feedback. This participant

recalled that in addition to a substantial increase in the number of followers, they received informal feedback from students, who would say, "'thank you for sharing that update' or 'this meme is hilarious' or 'thanks for like just having this account so we know what's going on.' So there was certainly a lot of support from students and not necessarily from the same students. So that was kind of an indication that we were breaking through" (AUFA 1). Social media was also effective in building networks among faculty associations. As one participant from CUEFA recalled, "So as we are sharing social media, it became national because all of the other faculty associations were sharing and were retweeting or were commenting, and we were sharing back and forth. One of the best things that came out of this strike, if good things can come out of strikes...is the increased communication between faculty associations.... We are now a part of this much bigger picture and, as opposed to just meeting at our CAUT meetings once or twice a year, we're now talking to each other" (CUEFA 2).

While faculty associations' teams perceived their use of social media to communicate with students and each other to be effective, communications teams' members were challenged to keep up with different social media platforms and to find the best balance in tone on those platforms. If there is a lesson to be learned here, it is that communication strategies need to focus not only on the substantive content and tone of the association's messages, but also on the medium and form through which those messages can be delivered. As the media landscape continues to evolve, union communication strategies will need to do so as well.

CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The public face of faculty association strikes is the picketing faculty, but behind the scenes these strikes are complex feats of organizing. Key to the success of a strike are its communications strategies. As our findings show, a faculty association's primary audience is its own membership, but its communications team cannot neglect other important audiences, including students, parents, and the general public. The evolving media landscape, which is characterized by consolidation and layoffs in legacy media and local news operations, the rise of social media platforms, and a burgeoning if narrowly accessed independent digital news media, makes this complex, not least because unions cannot rely on legacy media to devote resources to reporting on labour issues from the perspective of workers. For these reasons, a primary takeaway from our study is the importance of developing and implementing communications strategies well in advance of job action. In fact, when asked to reflect on what they would do differently, participants' most common response was to start earlier, whether in terms of putting together the team and assigning roles, setting up data management systems, or developing a communications strategy and timelines. Starting early will also allow more teams to take part in training workshops that are available through organizations like CAUT, Labor Notes, and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation that only take place periodically.[8]

Our findings suggest four additional points to consider as faculty associations begin to develop communications strategies for bargaining. First, it is important for communications teams to take stock of the evolving media landscape, keeping in mind that mainstream media coverage remains important but will distort important components of the union message and will not reach key constituencies. All the participants in our study used traditional press releases to reach local media, and some faculty associations also tried to engage local media through submitting letters to the editors and opinion columns. Moreover,

[8] Maton (2024) states that "Lesson 1" learned from the 2023 strike at Rutgers University is the need to "organize far in advance" (120). To that end, CAUT offers a training session explicitly dedicated to communications. Other organizations, like Labor Notes and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation have workshops dedicated to broader organizing strategies. A component of these workshops is learning how to better communicate with members, so these workshops can help communications team members develop important skills, even if they are not doing organizing work per se.

all the participants used social media, particularly in an effort to reach students, but there was recognition that the platforms students use will shift. It will be important for communications teams to develop an idea of who their audiences are and where they can be found in order to build and train the team that can best reach them. It is especially important to get an early start on social media engagement because, as one of our participants noted above, posting content prior to bargaining and job action can be an important way to both tell, and build the audience for, the union's story. Effectively harnessing different media is critical to getting out the association's message. To that end, participants reflected that it was critical to focus on the central message(s), stay on message rather than being reactive (even to misinformation from the administration) and to develop a plan for when to use different media to reach their audiences.

A second takeaway is for communications teams to think about committee structure. Building a committee with diverse skillsets is one critical aspect of this structure. Beyond the important skills of writing press releases and communiques to members and conducting interviews for TV and radio, communications teams may need members who are adept in website design, data visualization, crafting memes and pithy social media posts, videography, and photography. Communications teams may also need members who are bilingual (or multilingual). This is obviously important for universities in areas where there is a high level of linguistic diversity. But even in largely monolingual communities, there may be opportunities for media coverage (e.g., the French-language public broadcaster, Radio Canada), or to reach Canada's large population of international students. Our participants also highlighted the importance of building diversity in other areas, such as academic discipline, seniority, and gender, to ensure that the communications team can more effectively engage with members who will have different perspectives about the job action.

In addition to diversity, it is important for communications teams to consider the size of the team, scope of its work, and leadership structure. In our interviews, it became clear that most communications teams increased their membership as the workload expanded leading up to and during the strike. At the same time, some participants told us that members looking for alternative picket duties were often assigned to communications teams. While leaders wanted to accommodate everyone, this could lead to unnecessarily large and unwieldy teams. Because of all the skills that are important in strong communications, developing a plan early-on may allow teams to find roles for members with important skills, and slot in some who will need alternate picket duty, without the team becoming unmanageable. Participants also reflected that communications work during a job action is intense and fast paced. To ensure that work is done effectively, there ought to be clear expectations about the scope of the work, how decisions are made, and how the communications team engages with other committees (e.g., the negotiating team, the executive).

A third important finding was the importance of building relationships with students and parents. As many participants reflected, students were not just an audience for snarky memes, they were key allies who joined pickets, organized other students in solidarity actions, and put pressure on administrations (see also Maton 2024). Participants also conveyed a sense of obligation to respond transparently to students and parents about the process of job action and issues at stake, especially when the university administrations were providing minimal or distorted coverage. Communications teams need to give thought to how to communicate with students and parents about the process of bargaining and the issues at stake. Given the importance of these audiences, student and parent communications are something that faculty associations should consider if they are negotiating a media blackout with the employer prior to negotiations.

Finally, our interviews suggested the importance of working together as faculty associations to share ideas about communications. As noted above, communications and other workshops by labour organizations provide important skills training. In Canada, members of CAUT have access to advisors who can provide direct support to individual teams. While these resources are invaluable, our interviews suggested that the complexity of communications work points to the importance of regular formal and informal conversations among communications teams to share ideas and strategies. This is especially important for associations and members with more limited experience with job actions. One participant from ULFA who was new to

communications work emphasized the desire "to learn these best practices [so] we don't have to be doing this in these independent nodes, [and so] we can all share this information…and help each other out" (ULFA 1). In an individual strike, communications are crucial to building members' solidarity and maintaining morale so that union negotiators can secure the best tentative agreement possible. By building the capacity to share best communications practices in a constantly evolving media environment, communications teams can foster solidarity across faculty associations.

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