

ACTIVIST REPORT

THE INTERNET IS TEACHER UNION BUSINESS: A REPORT ABOUT THE NEW SOUTH WALES TEACHERS FEDERATION

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Introduction

The NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF, hereafter referred to as the Federation) is the statewide trades union for teachers in public schools, TAFE colleges, and Corrective Services. Representing a membership body of approximately 60,000 teachers, Federation's work requires active lines of communication that are equally accessible and effective for teachers in rural and remote areas as they are for those in urban centres.

The purpose of this report is to analyse union communications strategies, with a particular focus on the adoption of digital communications in union campaigns. As Communications Officer of the Federation and a former producer of an education podcast, my work enables me to reflect on the challenges of communicating with diverse internal and external audiences. This report begins with a historical overview of communications strategies within the NSWTF and then goes on to discuss specific communication strategies

A context for teacher union activism in New South Wales, Australia

As a union, the Federation has always existed to serve educators in the public sector. The NSW Teachers Federation formed in 1918, unifying a number of independent associations that had formed to cover different sections of the public school teaching profession over the previous decades. According to the first constitution adopted by the organisation, the purposes of the Federation included the goals of promoting the cause of

education in NSW, to pursue the advancement of teachers, and “to obtain for the Teaching Profession the same civil rights that belong to other members of the community”.

Throughout its history, Federation’s core focus areas have been fairly consistent: staffing levels, salaries and working conditions, the status and respect of the teaching profession, advocacy for public education, and securing adequate funding. These issues are central to the working rights and workplace experiences of teachers and, in turn, they define the educational experiences of students in the public education system.

While public education in Australia is constitutionally a state government responsibility, the Federal Government has, through funding, also played a role in education policy. In 1984, the Australian Education Union (AEU) was founded (originally as the Australian Teachers Federation) to provide national representation for teachers. In 2015 the Federation reconstituted as the NSW branch of the AEU. This change was prompted in part by the transition of TAFE teachers from a state to a federal jurisdiction under the Fair Work Act. The change was also made to harmonise the state and federal rules related to electing federal representatives. The majority of state teacher unions in Australia now exist as branches of the AEU, although they still function independently as each state and territory governs education differently, creating unique challenges.

Throughout the history of the AEU, a number of former officers of the Federation have been elected to the role of President or Deputy President of the AEU, and at the time of writing the current President of the Federation, Maurie Mulheron, is also AEU Deputy President.

Internal organisational structure

The Federation originally formed from a collection of independent associations. The internal decision-making structure takes the form of a representative democracy where teachers are represented by associations covering schools in geographical areas, and by associations covering non-school based positions, TAFE teachers and Corrective Services. This structure has been developed over time since the first full-time organiser position was created in 1936 to commence in 1937. Associations elect representatives to the State Council and

Annual Conference, two of the primary decision making bodies within Federation's governance model, while Federation's executive committee members are elected from among Association Councillors to oversee the ongoing operations of the organisation.

While the Federation currently employs more than 100 staff, the body of officers elected by the council that directs the work of Federation is elected from among the membership. As such the direction of operations within the organisation are often shaped by the knowledge, skills and interests of those who are elected. Elected organisers each have responsibility for working with associations to address workplace matters, prosecute campaign objectives, and disseminate information. The union is funded primarily by membership dues, though it also derives some income from leasing unused space in the building that houses Federation's main offices in Sydney. A complete financial statement of income and expenses is published every year in Federation's annual report.

Communication strategies and technologies

Union communications serve the following objectives: to recruit and retain members; to communicate regarding, and engage members in, current campaigns relating to salaries, working conditions and the state of public education; and, to influence state and federal education policy. Towards these goals, the union continuously disseminates a wide range of information to members about membership, workers' rights and protections and professional development/education.

Historically, elected officers have communicated directly with members through workplace and Association meetings. Such communications have been supported over time by a range of technologies including print, telephone, fax machines, and more recently email and internet-based media. One of the union's oldest and most important strategies for workplace communications has been the maintenance of a union noticeboard in school staffrooms or a similarly prominent place within the school. This allows for key notices, advertisements or other information to be posted in a central location and also serves as a persistent visual reminder of the presence and role of the Federation in education and industrial matters.

The union has published the journal, *Education*, for almost a century to communicate with its members and supporters. According to the Federation's first annual report of 1919, the journal existed to be 'the teachers' organ, written by teachers, in the interests of teachers'. In 2018, as the Federation rolled out information in celebration of its centenary, it was noted repeatedly that the issues raised in early editions of the journal and other communications – salaries, working conditions, class sizes, the status of the teaching profession, systemic supports for teachers particularly in remote and rural areas – remained consistent with the issues the union pursues today. The format of the journal has changed with the cost of available printing technologies, starting as a pressed newsletter, spending many years on newsprint, and currently produced as a light-gloss tabloid print and digital (news.nswtf.org.au) newspaper.

The Federation currently publishes eight editions annually, twice per school term – down from sixteen per year in the past decade. Of the union's 60,000 members, approximately 50,000 still choose to have *Education* mailed to their home address while the remaining 10,000 have opted to engage with Federation material in digital formats.

In addition to the journal, Federation produces a range of targeted content including newsletters, primarily relating to the work of Special Interest Groups (SIGs) and specialist officers within the organisation that speak to issues that affect specific demographic groups and workplaces within the membership (e.g. LGBTIQ+, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Small Schools, Women, and early career teachers).

Changes in union communication strategies have been influenced by changes in modes of communication (e.g. introduction of fax machines and computers), the accessibility and cost of these technologies as well as the changes in organisational priorities. The conduct of mass meetings has been one significant area of change. A state as large and disparately populated as NSW presents significant challenges for mass meetings, which depend on participation by the entire membership base. For example, every 2-4 years the entire membership is required to vote on awards and staffing agreements that define the salaries and working conditions of teachers. Prior to 1989, Federation members would take stop-

work action in order to attend mass meetings held simultaneously at different locations around the state. Speaker's notes and relevant record-keeping documents would either be mailed to meeting convenors or taken by senior officers attending each meeting. For members in remote parts of NSW, attendance at such meetings was not possible, and so phone-in services were available for those members to hear relevant content.

Then, in 1985, Sky Channel was launched by Tabcorp Holdings to live-broadcast horse and greyhound races for the purposes of gambling. It also offered Sky Business TV, a part-time channel for other organisations and businesses to send out live broadcasts. Federation adopted this form of broadcast communication in 1989, which enabled simultaneous meetings to occur across the state. Members were able to listen to centralised presentations by the union's presidential officers and then debate and vote at their locations.

After the company chose to stop operating this TV channel, Federation transitioned to using pre-recorded messages to be played at meetings. While efforts were made to broadcast such content over the internet, the lack of reliable internet service across NSW meant that pre-recorded messages were still necessary. Since 2016, Federation has engaged the services of television corporation Foxtel to resume broadcast meetings across the state.

The introduction of fax machines into NSW schools from 1990 also changed day-to-day communications with members. Fax machines were replaced by computers and internet-based communications such as emails by the mid-2000s, although fax machines continued to be used until 2014.

As in many professions, teachers experience the constant tension between teachers exercising individual professional judgement and the managerial tendencies of governing bodies – in this case governments and government departments. The latter attempt to enforce policies and practices in a top-down manner that overrides teachers' professional judgement in the context of their workplace. From the perspective of NSW teachers, changes in education technology have also been accompanied by this tension between teacher autonomy and state managerialism.

A case in point is the introduction of computers and internet web-based services into schools, which was accompanied by an increased burden of bureaucratic work on teachers. While school principals were provided with organisational email accounts around the turn of the century, it was not until the mid-2000s that the the Department of Education and Training rolled out a state-wide email system and web services platform for all teachers. At this time, it was not uncommon for a staffroom of 8-10 teachers to have only one or two computers to be used during common break times to perform their recordkeeping duties. In 2002-2003, NSW Premier Bob Carr went so far as to deploy new web platforms that ignored the terms negotiated by the Federation for fair and reasonable working conditions. This decision prompted the union to place a moratorium on web services in schools from November 2003 to November 2005.

Teachers also experienced a digital divide early in the Labor Party's "Digital Education Revolution" (DER), introduced after their victory in the 2007 federal election. As part of the Labor election platform, the National Secondary School Computer Fund was established to provide improved broadband access to all schools. Every high school student from year 9-12 received a laptop device and high school teachers received both computers and technical support. While there were significant variations between states and territories, primary teachers were largely excluded from the DER.

Digital Communications

An internal driving force behind Federation's adoption of digital media and internet technologies has been John Dixon, the current General Secretary, and former Assistant General Secretary (Communications and Administration). In 1997, Mr Dixon, through Federation's Eric Pearson Study Grant, undertook a study tour to explore an area of practice relevant to Federation business. Mr Dixon's study program intended to explore "the use of information technology systems, in particular the internet in the development of campaigning and communication strategies for the New South Wales Teachers Federation". The resulting report, titled *@unions – the internet is union business*, also available in hard copy from Federation's library, observed that "Unions, particularly teacher unions, have always been in the information industry... The internet and its associated technology such as the World Wide Web

give us additional means not only to communicate with union members but also has the potential for stronger and faster participatory forms of communication regardless of distance”.

The Federation’s communications with members has significantly shifted into the realm of digital communications. At present, Federation’s primary communications channels include email, electronic newsletters, a password-protected website (nswtf.org.au), Facebook, Twitter and YouTube accounts. The website was first established in the mid-nineties¹ while the Facebook page was created in 2008 (four years after the founding of Facebook). One of the challenges of digital communications is avoiding over-use, which risks overwhelming Federation communications with the white noise of a massive volume of emails. With this goal in mind, the union has developed a free mobile phone app that tailors information based on an individual’s membership status and preferences.

Currently, Federation maintains a communications units consisting of one elected officer and seven staff, of which there are a deputy editor, sub-editor, graphic designer, an administrative assistant and a staff manager. The positions of Digital Media Producer and Digital Communications Administrator were created in recent years to support the creation of digital content, and to consolidate management of content being shared via digital channels including email, websites and social media.

The officer has the primary responsibility for the publishing of the printed journal and ensuring that outgoing communications reflect Federation’s policy and campaign objectives. As digital communications rapidly became more complicated, external agents were engaged for the design, hosting and maintenance of internet sites, with Federation staff and officers taking on roles of content management.

The union occasionally employs third-party consultants and content producers for established media and marketing roles, such as production of radio and television commercials, and managing relationships with commercial media outlets. The union also currently maintains a small commercial-quality

¹ The earliest version still available on the Wayback Machine is from December 1996, available at <https://web.archive.org/web/19961224224248/http://www.nswtf.org.au:80/>.

audio recording studio which is used for recording interviews and podcasts.

Key Campaigns

As an industrial and professional union representing public sector employees, the Federation engages in campaign activities that are ultimately aimed at influencing government policy or legislation regarding education and the employment of teachers. Where possible, this is achieved through negotiation and consultation, escalating to public campaigns to influence public opinion and industrial action when this is deemed to be necessary. Campaign actions are historically directed by Federation's democratic representative governance structure, with campaign actions being carried out by the union's elected officers.

Early campaign communications relied primarily on interpersonal interactions to mobilise members. Organisers and volunteers would hand out flyers and petitions at public events. Activists would also go door knocking to talk to people individually as a way to raise awareness and support amongst the general public for individual campaigns. Other communication strategies included letter writing and postcard campaigns to politicians, as well as protest rallies and stop-work actions.

In a history of many notable rallies and strike actions, the first 24-hour strike and public rally took place 50 years after Federation's formation. In 1968, a majority of NSW teachers went on strike over issues of working conditions and salaries and attended a large rally held outside the Parliament House (Fitzgerald, 2011; NSWTF, 1968). In 1988, Federation held one of the largest rallies in Australian labour union history with more than 80,000 teachers gathering in Sydney to protest against state government policy (Poulos, 1988). Following the state election in 1988, Liberal Minister for Education, Terry Metherell applied the market-based model of self-managing small businesses to the administration of public schools. Many Federation members argued that this represented an almost complete degradation of the notion of an education system by reducing all schools to individual workplaces. This is an ideological battle that continues till today (Fitzgerald, 2011).

Over the past decade, Federation has incorporated the use of digital media into its campaign strategies. Facebook and Twitter have been the primary platforms used to engage members, particularly younger members, as well as the public. At various times, the union has also established and contributed to other short-term campaign-specific websites and social media accounts such as *Teachers Make a Difference* and *I Give a Gonski* (igiveagonski.com.au).

Teachers Make a Difference

In 2011, the Federation launched the Teachers Make a Difference² campaign to provide a positive depiction of teachers in NSW public schools. Throughout 2012 and 2014, the union produced videos which featured narratives about the many ways that teachers in schools and TAFE colleges have a positive impact on students' lives. These ads sought to represent the more emotional and ephemeral benefits that an effective teacher can provide for students through positive connections and relationships.

These advertisements represented one of the Federation's largest media productions. The union engaged noted author and education advocate Jane Caro to write the scripts, and renowned Australian filmmaker Ray Lawrence to direct them. The campaign included four ads, made in pairs over two years, which were connected by the tagline "It takes a very special person to be a teacher". The first pair of ads, titled 'First Day' and 'Last Day' told stories about teachers beginning and ending their professional careers. The second pair of ads titled 'The Apprentice' and 'Hawa's story' told the stories of two students – a TAFE apprentice and a former refugee – who were motivated to succeed by their respective teachers. These videos were disseminated primarily through cinema advertising and revived in 2016 through a paid social media campaign.

I Give a Gonski

This national multiyear campaign formed in response to findings of the 2012 'Gonski report' on school funding. The report was written by a committee appointed by then Minister of Education Julia Gillard, and chaired by David Gonski (*DEEWR, 2011*). It recommended a significant increase in

² <https://teachersmakeadifference.org.au/>

funding of schools, allocated according to the individual needs of students. This campaign consolidated decades of different state and Federal campaigns on the issue of fair federal funding of public education. The then-Labor government developed funding legislation informed by the recommendations of the report, which created a needs-based funding model that distributed funding according to the indicated socio-educational disadvantage faced by students in each school. The legislation included a six-year transition period to get schools up to the minimum required Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) – which meant that it stretched across multiple Federal elections and budgetary estimates periods. A core goal of the campaign was to secure this legislation and see the transition to the fully-funded SRS completed. The media component of the multiyear campaign incorporated political cartoons, videos, infographics³ and Tweetathons that were produced and disseminated online at particular times to influence policymakers and the public.

Political Cartoons

In 2016, the Federation commissioned political cartoons by cartoonist Greg Gaul, to critique education policy and promote Federation and the AEU’s campaigns. Greg Gaul has produced cartoons for Federation’s journal and other publications for nearly 40 years.

The cartoon in Figure 1 highlights the disparity between schooling for rich and poor students. The line “a mix of old and new technologies” was a direct quote from the Prime Minister about the variations in the national broadband network, which contributed to unequal access to highspeed internet across Australia.

³ An infographic (information graphic) is a visual representation of largely quantitative information which aims to make the data easily understandable at a first glance. See Figure 3 for an infographic on the Gonski reform.

Figure 1 – Political Cartoon by Greg Gaul, produced during the 2016 Federal Election campaign



Videos

The union produced multiple videos in support of the campaign. One highly-circulated animated video titled “What is Gonski?”⁴, narrated by Jane Caro, explained the technical details of the ‘Gonski’ schools funding model. This video was animated in the style of a hand drawing on a whiteboard to provide illustrations aligned with an engaging and informative narration.

Another example was a campaign video diary, which documented the Gonski Bus tour⁵ where teachers travelled from their schools in Queensland, NSW, Victoria and South Australia to Canberra to a meeting of education ministers in Canberra. During the NSW leg of the journey, Federation staff and officers produced daily videos of the many school visits.

4 NSWTF Youtube channel - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xylDiO17RGI>

5 Federation TV Showcase- <http://fedtv.nswtf.org.au/detail/videos/general/video/5363937304001/gonski-bus-tour-compilation?autoStart=true&page=2>

These videos conveyed messages from public school teachers in support of the implementation of the Gonski reforms. The bus tour and the videos raised the visibility of education in more remote communities and received sympathetic coverage from regional and local newspapers.

Figure 2 – ‘What is Gonski?’ infographic



Tweethathons

Twitter was created in 2011 and has become one of the primary platforms for campaign actions due to the public nature of all content and the ability to speak directly to people and organisations on the platform. Tweetathon is the name given to a coordinated effort to generate a large volume of posts within a limited time period in order to generate enough repeat uses of campaign keywords and hashtags (e.g. #Gonski) to have them appear in ‘trend maps’ or on lists of ‘trending topics’ and draw attention to associated campaign messages. These

events are coordinated nationally through email. Members are sent instructions along with samples of social media-friendly messages.

The first significant Twitter campaign action occurred on the evening of October 27 during National Gonski Week in 2015. By 9 pm, Gonski was the top-trending topic on Twitter in Australia. Two other highly successful Tweethathons were organised – to coincide with federal Budget announcements in 2016 and federal government announcements about a new Gonski 2.0 model in 2017.⁶ Also during 2017, Federation sent out approximately 2200 tweets – each one with the name of a public school in NSW and the amount of funding they stood to lose in 2018/19 if the government’s new model was passed. All three Tweethathons included tweets in support of the Gonski reforms from high-profile federal and state politicians.

Infographics: An infographic (information graphic) is a visual representation of information, which aims to make the data easily understandable at a first glance. The Federation produced infographics to explain the scope and implications of the Gonski reforms for fair school funding reforms

Lessons learned

The Federation’s experience suggests that multimedia communications circulated through online networks have contributed to union advocacy in multiple ways. First, new technologies have provided us with low-cost, speedy and direct means of communication with a diverse range of audiences across barriers of time and distance. Internet-based media also allows union activists to record and document mobilisations as they occur through photos, videos, Facebook posts and tweets, independent of coverage by mainstream media. Next and relatedly, the significant increases in our online followers⁷ and subscribers tells us that the media is reaching a wide online audience – within and beyond the membership. Relatedly, we have observed the growth of vibrant online communities to

⁶ An estimated 14,900 tweets were sent over a 24-hour period, and a peak rate of 130 tweets per minute (according to data gathered from trendsmat.com).

⁷ For example, the number of followers of Federation’s primary facebook page grew from 7100 in January of 2016 to more than 16000 by December 2017.

educate and advocate for greater recognition and respect for diversity within the union membership.

Limitations have to do with producing social-media friendly extracts which need to be very short summaries of key messages.

This practice runs the risk of reducing complex and situated analysis to superficial soundbites. Our goal here remains to use digital media to attract attention and then direct users to deeper engagement with complex policy and social issues related to public education. Last but not least, the Federation is careful to balance digital communications with traditional modes of communication and activism to support the necessary mobilisation of members and supporters for public events as required. In the union's experience, these strategies remain most effective in achieving broad participation of the Federation's membership.

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