12-31-2024

Data-driven Labor Organizing. Helping workers or driving the insatiable hunger for data?

Tobias Mettler
University of Lausanne, tobias.mettler@me.com

© Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems, 2024 36(2), 347-352

Mettler: Data-driven Labor Organizing. Helping workers or driving the insatiable hunger for data

Reflection note

Data-driven Labor Organizing

Helping workers or driving the insatiable hunger for data

Tobias Mettler
University of Lausanne, Switzerland
tobias.mettler@unil.ch

Abstract. This article is a response to Nyman et al. (2024) article on forging a research agenda on data-driven labor organizing. While recognizing the potential benefits, this short commentary posits that data-driven labor organizing might transfer the responsibility from trade unions to individual workers. This transfer, however, may have limited efficacy as it fails to address today's major power imbalances and the constrained collective bargaining capacity of trade unions in certain industry sectors.

Key words: data-driven labor organizing, datafication, trade unions, work surveillance.

Nyman et al. (2024) challenge the polarized discourse on workplace datafication. Instead of viewing it solely as a managerial tool, they propose datafication as a potential avenue for trade unions (TU) to strengthen worker representation. While acknowledging the complexities of data governance, the authors emphasize the need for inclusive decision-making processes involving diverse stakeholders. Central to their argument is the assertion that the trade union TU approach aligns with the aspiration for data inquiry and deliberation not to be confined to managerial prerogatives but to also contribute to the advancement of workplace democracy.

Although recognizing the merits of their argument, it becomes apparent that their analysis concludes precisely as the central issue emerges: the imbalance of power. In 'well-functioning' democracies, the bedrock lies in the freedom to express oneself, the embrace of diverse perspectives, the acknowledgment of inconvenient truths, and, above all, the balancing and recalibration of power. Over the course of centuries, trade unions have operated as political actors with the objective of reducing the disparity in power between labor and capital (Streeck & Hassel, 2003). A formula how to 'crack'

this disequilibrium, of course, has also been a numbers game. Size matters in economic disputes. Thus, in sectors historically characterized by substantial trade union representation, such as the industrial sector, reaching agreements that align with workers' interests has been comparatively more feasible (Metcalf, 2003). However, many trade unions representing emerging job sectors, notably those within areas of knowledge work (Olsen, 2016), often confront challenges stemming from their modest scale, limited self-organization, scattered interests, and resultant absence of collective bargaining leverage, which leads workers in those sectors favor individualistic negotiation strategies.

Even though more and more people are acting in their own self-interest these days, the authors argue that the way to enhance collective bargaining power lies in the establishment of data cooperatives. In this regard, the authors emphasize the imperative for workers, rather than trade unions, to enhance their data literacy to enable effective participation in such cooperatives. Yet, it is hard to believe that data literacy alone may redress power differentials inherent in labor-capital relations. While acknowledging the adage that (more) information equates to (more) power, it is imperative to recognize that sheer power sometimes dwarfs everything else (…or only power is power). Even governments often enough fail to compel certain companies to adhere to enacted privacy and labor laws and act responsibly. Therefore, even if trade unions were furnished with extensive information, systematically collected through tools such as member-operated applications or aggregated self-managed data, this might not necessarily alter the trajectory of negotiations. It might, hopefully, sensitize some good intentioned managers to workers' concerns, which brings me to the next point.

Nyman et al. (2024) rightly criticize scholars for adopting a binary perspective on datafication, yet it is important to recognize that their own analysis of the relationship between labor and capital also relies on a dualistic understanding. We tend to forget it, but the relationship between workers and employers isn't always adversarial. In today's competitive job market, many companies are vying for talented workers. Offering good working conditions has become a way for businesses to gain a lasting edge over their competitors. Therefore, already before the onset of COVID-19, this has, amongst other things, prompted a rise in digital solutions for managing occupational health (Yassaee & Mettler, 2019). Despite good intentions, unforeseen consequences may sometimes arise. Digital ecosystems have become increasingly complicated and opaque—also for experts. In such a complicated web of actors, it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain an overview of who receives and uses which data for which purposes. Data governance becomes a Herculean challenge, especially as various types of data often must adhere to different regulations and provisions, a point not extensively explored by Nyman et al. (2024).

© Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems, 2024 36(2), 347-352

Mettler: Data-driven Labor Organizing. Helping workers or driving the insatiable hunger for data

Also, the development of truly 'free' solutions that are independent of third party interests is becoming more and more utopian, especially since many Free/Libre and Open Source Software have become reliant on the resources of tech giants or even part of their solution portfolio, as happened to GitHub, MySQL, or Symbian to mention just a few (Silver, 2018; West & Wood, 2014). Therefore, while emphasizing the significance of data literacy for workers, it is equally imperative for well-intentioned employers, and of course, trade unions, to cultivate a nuanced understanding of these issues.

Another aspect that has not received sufficient attention by Nyman et al. (2024) is the question of whether datafication is really necessary. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant changes globally legitimizing organizations, including trade unions, to collect extensive sensitive data about individuals. Sharing health data has become increasingly 'the new normal', with some researchers even advocating for its acceptability as long as workers are adequately informed, given the opportunity to participate, and derive benefits from such data collection (Downie et al., 2024). At times, an analogy between athletes and regular workers is made, a notion that I find inherently problematic (although this discussion warrants its own separate article). But like Mau (2019) already questioned, is it truly necessary to quantify every aspect of our lives? Do we really need to reign into the to the inevitability of datafication and use it for improving workers' rights (as I read Nyman's et al. argumentation), or should we instead assist trade unions in mounting resistance against excessive data collection efforts?

In the end, the links between datafication and the erosion of privacy has been extensively documented since the emergence of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2018). Despite vocal endorsements of privacy's importance in surveys and media discourse, convenience often takes precedence in practice (on both sides, among employees and employers). A significant portion of people has become accustomed to being tracked, leading to a sentiment where protecting one's privacy feels like an uphill battle—an endeavor that appears futile. Yet, with the advent of what I term 'connected surveillance,' the ramifications extend beyond tech giants exploiting (avoidable) digital footprints on the web (Mettler, 2024). You don't need to shop online if you don't want. But you might need to work to make a living unless you haven't won the lottery or inherited considerable sums. Therefore, and with surveillance increasingly expanding to the work context, it is becoming increasingly more difficult to escape surveillance. In this regard, I can comprehend and empathize with the concerns expressed by the scholars categorized by Nyman et al. (2024) as dystopians. Different from the past, this new wave of surveillance namely transcends issues of information privacy, encroaching upon bodily autonomy, social relationships, and personal space. The scope broadens to encompass the very essence of human dignity (Leidner & Tona, 2021) and the framework for

harmonious coexistence between humans and machines implementing the vision of algorithmic management. Therefore, as long as human reliance on labor endures and we are not entirely replaced by machines, safeguarding our dignity becomes of utmost importance. Instead of imposing additional burdens on workers, especially those confronting substantial power imbalances, such as individuals in low-skilled occupations like gig workers, by assigning them data collection responsibilities typically sought by employers to gain leverage in negotiations, trade unions should concentrate on protecting the dignity and rights of their members. We should begin to contemplate more earnestly which aspects of life truly warrant datafication and which are better off remaining beyond the reach of extensive data collection.

Bibliography

Downie, L. A., Pachidi, S., Huysman, M., & Hafermalz, E. (2024). On the right track? Studying the use of biometric data to manage people in organizations. *Academy of Management Discoveries*, *forthcoming*.

Leidner, D. E., & Tona, O. (2021). The CARE theory of dignity amid personal data digitalization. *MIS Quarterly*, *45*(1), 343-370.

Mau, S. (2019). *The Metric society: On the quantification of the social*. John Wiley & Sons.

Metcalf, D. (2003). Trade unions. In R. Dickens, P. Gregg, & J. Wadsworth (Eds.), *The labour market under new labour: The state of working Britain 2003* (pp. 170-187). Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230598454_12

Mettler, T. (2024). The connected workplace: Characteristics and social consequences of work surveillance in the age of datification, sensorization, and artificial intelligence. *Journal of Information Technology*, *forthcoming*. https://doi.org/10.1177/02683962231202535

Nyman, S., Benfeldt, O., Gierlich-Joas, M., Bagger, C., Zambach, S., Blicher, A., Mazumdar, S., Nørbjerg, J., Bødker, M., Moyano, J. P.-., Jensen, T. B., & Clemmensen, T. (2024). From algorithmic management to data-driven labour

© Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems, 2024 36(2), 347-352

Mettler: Data-driven Labor Organizing. Helping workers or driving the insatiable hunger for data

organising: A trade union approach to workplace datafication. *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems*, *36(1),* 13-38.

Olsen, K. M. (2016). The power of workers: Knowledge work and the power balance in Scandinavian countries. *Employee Relations*, *38*(3), 390-405.

Silver, A. (2018). Microsoft's purchase of GitHub leaves some scientists uneasy. *Nature*, *558*(7710), 353-354.

Streeck, W., & Hassel, A. (2003). Trade unions as political actors. In J. T. Addison & C. Schnabel (Eds.), *International handbook of trade unions* (pp. 335-365). Elgar.

West, J., & Wood, D. (2014). Evolving an open ecosystem: The rise and fall of the Symbian platform. In *Collaboration and Competition in Business Ecosystems* (Vol. 30, pp. 27-67). Emerald Group Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1108/S0742-3322(2013)0000030005

Yassaee, M., & Mettler, T. (2019). Digital occupational health systems: What do employees think about it? *Information Systems Frontiers*, *21*(4), 909-924. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10796-017-9795-6

Zuboff, S. (2018). The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power. PublicAffairs.