

## THE ETHICAL AND STRATEGIC DIMENSIONS OF USING WORKERS' PERSONAL STORIES

**Yair Cohen-Barzilai**

University of Haifa, Israel

### Abstract

This study explores how workers' digital personal storytelling is used as a persuasive tool in organizational conflicts. The study examines how workers use personal storytelling to self-promote, brand their employers, and engage in social activism. The study also examines the tensions and implications involved in using workers' personal stories as part of digital campaigns.

**Keywords:** Digital personal storytelling, Organizational conflicts, Neoliberal settings, Self-promotion

### Introduction

This study explores how workers' digital personal storytelling—in tandem with performances of self-promotion, employer branding, and social activism—evolves as a discursive practice in organizational conflicts that are embedded in neoliberal settings. Personal storytelling emerges on social media in various workplace-related contexts: Job seekers and candidates narrate their professional persona as means of marketing themselves as desirable employees on platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter (Gershon, 2014), and experienced workers endorse their employers' brand by sharing their occupational success stories on extra-organizational online communication platforms (e.g., Braddy, Meade, & Kroustalis, 2006; Cervellon & Lirio, 2017; Maagaard, 2014; Madia, 2011). At the same time, in the social activism sphere, individuals join digital campaigns through which they expose their personal stories, reaching out to various audiences in promoting their collective causes (e.g., Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2016; Ganz, 2001; Gerbaudo, 2022; Lénárt-Cheng & Walker, 2011; Polletta, 2009; Polletta, Docarmo, Ward, & Callahan, 2021; Shifman, 2018; Vivienne, 2016). My purpose is to unpack the ways in which digital personal storytelling serves as a persuasive tool during labor struggles, as well as the tensions and implications involved in using workers' personal stories as part of digital campaigns led on public social media by contending organizational parties.

Drawing on literature in the fields of organizational communication, social movements, digital activism, and labor studies, this article contributes to scholarship on workers' online discourses surrounding precarious employment situations in neoliberal organizational settings. While some studies explore how freelance, self-employed workers cope with their job insecurities (e.g., Fleming, 2017; Norbäck, 2021; Scharff, 2016), this study aims to understand how workers in "standard" work arrangements contend with their increasing exposure to uncertainty in the labor market (Vallas & Christin, 2018). By focusing on the use of digital personal storytelling,

the study also contributes to the growing body of scholarship examining the different ways in which union activists around the world use social media in their struggles (e.g., Diamond & Freeman, 2002; Salamon, 2022; Upchurch & Grassman, 2016) as well as how labor struggles are shaped through the adoption of digital discourse practices in mobilizing workers surrounding work and employment issues (Geelan, 2021).

During labor struggles, union organizers use online platforms to publicly address workers and employers. Their practices include posting straightforward Why We've Organized statements in which they list their collective demands (Salamon, 2022). In this study, I focus on unionization-related online statements that are individualistic in essence: I analyze personal stories by which workers introduced themselves and outlined their career paths and prospects as they partook in digital campaigns supporting or opposing unionization efforts in their organizations. The personal stories I examine are short selfnarrations in which participants explained why they joined the campaigns, by reflecting on their own experiences and expectations as organizational members. The stories were posted on designated Facebook pages during unionization efforts in three major Israeli telecommunication companies—Pelephone, Cellcom, and Partner (between 2012 and 2014). These labor struggles were waged against the backdrop of the erosion of the protective labor system in Israel, a process typical of other neoliberal economies around the world (Kristal, 2013; Rosenhek & Shalev, 2014). The workers' online unionization discourse was embedded in a global and Israeli culture that celebrates individualism and self-promotion (Fisher & Fisher, 2019). Such neoliberal ideals, which prevail in their workplace, are also embodied in the design of the platforms these workers used (Marwick, 2013).

To explore how workers used personal storytelling as a discursive practice during pro-union or antiunion campaigns on Facebook, I first examine how the participants—Facebook page administrators and storytellers—reached out to their audiences. Following that, I examine how, based on their personal stories, workers from both sides of the conflict explained their position for or against unionization in their organization. My analysis illustrates how—through personal storytelling that underlines one's own accomplishments and ambitions—union supporters advocated unionization without committing to collectivist ideas that might dim the glow of their individualistic image as entrepreneurial selves, and, at the same time, how union opponents expressed commitment to their employer despite the hurdles they experienced as individuals facing an increasingly precarious work environment. While workers from both sides were encouraged by page administrators to join the digital campaigns, they used the technological affordances of Facebook to fine-tune their personal exposure. Furthermore, conforming with the value placed on authenticity in such social media interactions, they composed their stories in creative ways that allowed them to simultaneously engage with a collective cause and perform self-promotion.

### **Literature Review**

People publicly share stories about their individual experiences as means of legitimating their actions. Such personal stories from workers or job-seekers serve as “lenses through which leaders as well as rank and file assess opportunities and obstacles, costs and benefits, and success and failure” (Polletta, 1998, p. 430). By publishing their life stories, people convey who they are and how they accomplished their personal and social achievements, claiming their worth as valued members of a community (Linde, 1993). Storytellers link their

identities to those of their readers to gain credibility among their audience and to construct common interpretations of how to pursue their shared journey (Ganz, 2001). Celebrated for its authenticity, personal storytelling bears the capacity to inspire and mobilize action by those in power as well as by those fighting against social injustices (Polletta, 2009). Storytelling campaigns have become part of the strategic repertoire of contemporary social activism as means of drawing wide attention among audiences surrounding various issues (Polletta et al., 2021). With the emergence of online social networking, the age-old practice of self-narration has become more accessible to users and the time spans of interactions between storytellers and their readers have reduced (Sauter, 2014). Thus, responding to the technological affordances of platforms such as Facebook, individuals engage with different audiences in different contexts by posting short personal stories.

In what follows, I begin with discussing performances of digital personal storytelling in workplace-related contexts. Then, I turn to digital storytelling movements and consider the tensions that workers might face when they join such campaigns, in general, and particularly as part of unionization struggles. Finally, I focus on self-narration strategies that workers may adopt as they engage in digital campaigns during organizational conflicts embedded in neoliberal settings.

### ***Workplace-Related Digital Personal Storytelling***

In organizational discourse, storytelling is a discursive practice by which individuals construct their identities as workers and present themselves to others by articulating ideas, aspirations, and concerns, drawing on the prevailing sociocultural narratives of personal success (Ybema et al., 2009). Coping with the precarity of neoliberal labor markets, workers wish to appear employable as part of their continuous effort to secure a job within, or outside, their organization (Wittekind, Raeder, & Grote, 2010). In this quest, job seekers and candidates advertise their qualifications and experience by providing appealing indications of their “employable self” (Gershon, 2014, 2017). In doing so, they adopt the predominant commercialized discourse of self-branding (Vallas & Christin, 2018).

Furthermore, in correlation with social, economic, and technological changes, different genres of organizational communication—including those involving self-narration—are created, reproduced, and altered through continual interactions between institutionalized systems and individual actors (Salamon, 2022; Yates & Orlikowski, 1992). As part of these ongoing processes, organizations are able to use the technological affordances of social networking sites, which encourage users to generate and consume life stories for different purposes (Morrison, 2014). In this framework, companies elicit, produce, and publish employee self-told stories on extra-organizational channels such as corporate websites, blogs, Facebook pages, YouTube, Twitter, or LinkedIn accounts to enhance their online recruitment communication and image management (Braddy et al., 2006; Madia, 2011). Through such personal stories, workers embody the special qualities of their organization (Maagaard, 2014).

This practice of involving workers in endorsing the corporate brand exemplifies how, in a precarious labor environment, workers take on the burden of promoting the reputation of their employers to secure their own employment prospects (Neff, 2012). At the same time, workers who are less satisfied with their job tend to tone down their employer endorsement, for instance by sharing less workplace-related information on their personal

social media accounts (Cervellon & Lirio, 2017). Such ambivalence in expressing employer identification is inherent in situations of organizational resistance (Mumby, Thomas, Martí, & Seidl, 2017). While workers may generally acknowledge their relatively advantageous employment terms, they might share personal stories about specific experiences that are inconsistent with the appealing narratives that their employers wish to present (Li, 2022).

### ***Workers' Participation in Activist Digital Storytelling Campaigns***

Alongside commercial performances, sharing personal life stories emerges in the sphere of social activism as part of digital campaigns through which community members engage in a democratic process, aiming to promote social change (Lénárt-Cheng & Walker, 2011). Digital activist campaigns may involve site administrators who facilitate—invite, produce, and interpret personal stories—and orchestrate storytellers who, with their individual experiences, stand together simultaneously and represent their social group (Vivienne, 2016).

Such curated digital storytelling campaigns reproduce “modern liberal notions of the self as rational, unitary, and assured of its free agency” (Fernandes, 2017, p. 11). In coordinated social protests on social media, participants value internal authenticity: Individuals tend to express their “true selves” by candidly conveying their own information, emotions, and judgments and constructing authenticity by sharing subjective evidence from personal experiences rather than objective scientific facts about the world (Shifman, 2018). Deliberating their mutual causes online, participants comply with (or subvert) the discursive practices of others by adopting or altering textual components of content, form, and stance that previous speakers have created and used as means of self-positioning (Gal et al., 2016). Through personalized repetition with variation, which social networking technologies afford and encourage, participants in digital rallies “utilize a shared formula as a basis for individual expression” (Shifman, 2018, p. 181). Such repetition in personal stories of employment experiences—which are unique but similar—enables highlighting the structural characteristics of organizational problems and the need for institutional, rather than incidental, solutions (Gerbaudo, 2022).

With the proliferation of personal storytelling as a discursive practice in social justice movements, individuals who consider joining activist digital campaigns may face a dilemma: Sharing one's personal story in support of external, noncommercial, collective causes contradicts the idea of the career as a life project of the self—according to which workers direct all personal resources toward excelling in professional achievements and being remunerated with high financial earnings (Grey, 1994). This tension surfaced, for example, when top American athletes shared their personal stories in supporting the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Zirin, 2016). By doing so, they added an activist element to their online persona, and as a result, they risked public criticism, which could jeopardize their opportunities for profitable brand endorsement campaigns. By the same token, in neoliberal economies, joining unionization campaigns might compromise the prevalent self-branding of a knowledge worker as an “individualistic, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps” kind of person (Rodino-Colocino, 2007, p. 219).

However, visible performances of support are essential in unionization efforts. Labor activism historically involves public displays in the form of picket lines, marches, and demonstrations—in which groups assemble, raise placards, chant slogans, and invite others to join in (Bonilla, 2011). These practices include storytelling: Prior to the widespread implementation of digital social movements, the campaigning toolkit of labor organizers

included distributing printed flyers containing photos and testimonials of union supporters. The purposes of publishing such workers' personal narratives of how they were mistreated by their employer were to demonstrate the participants' fearless commitment to the struggle, enhance cohesiveness among workers, and engage others with the cause (Brimeyer, Eaker, & Clair, 2004). As events of organizational resistance emerge in different workplace contexts, activists emphasize symbolic discursive practices, including storytelling, as effective forms of protest (Cloud, 2005; Putnam & Real, 2005).

Furthermore, in neoliberal economies, such as Israel, where union density is low, industrial action derives its power and legitimacy from the qualitative dimension of workers' active participation in labor campaigning, more than from the quantitative dimension of large membership numbers (Mundlak, 2020). Therefore, union organizers are likely to urge workers to personally present their support by visibly partaking in pro-union digital campaigns, and management might try to delegitimize unionization by urging workers to similarly join anti-union digital campaigns. Such coordinated processes may be defined as hybrid collectivist and connectivist digital campaigns, which are orchestrated top-down and performed through individualistic expression (Pasquier, Daudigeos, & Barros, 2020).

### ***Self-Narration in Neoliberal Organizational Settings***

In neoliberal societies, the government and business sectors have abandoned their traditional responsibilities of securing citizens' essential livelihood and welfare, leaving families and individuals to cope with major life risks on their own (Hacker, 2004). The social safety net offered by the state and by collective institutions such as trade unions has been reduced in favor of a labor market that emphasizes individuals' accountability for their occupational success or failure (Harvey, 2007). With the increasing role of financial markets in the global economy, firms focus on generating profits for shareholders, and workers are urged to consider themselves as investors instead of employees—having their employment stability, compensation, benefits, as well as their retirement pension tied to stock market values (Davis, 2009). As a result of such structural developments, the definition of job security has changed from “lifetime employment” to “lifetime-employability,” signifying that individuals are expected to find and keep a job by continuously developing their personal skills and competencies and by managing their own career (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Forrier & Sels, 2003).

The neoliberal perspective sees people “in terms of corporate individualism—a flexible bundle of skills that reflexively manages oneself as though the self was a business” (Gershon, 2011, p. 546). Thus, in neoliberal organizational settings, employers promote a culture that encourages workers to pursue excellence and “to become an ‘entrepreneur of the self,’ where the achievement of success is dictated by one’s consumerist, innovative, and youthful performance” (Gill, 2013, p. 336). By doing so, workers enact the ideal “neoliberal subject,” which is fulfilled through individual agency and risk-taking (Mumby, 2015). In this spirit, people often narrate their career as a personal journey—constructing the stories of their lives as if they were travelers moving between (or staying in) organizations, roles, jobs, and occupations along the way (Inkson, 2004). As individuals bear increased risks and responsibilities in pursuing and securing their employability, they relate to their work using financial terminology such as gaining ownership in the company by investing their time and effort in work (Neff, 2012). At the same time, social media platforms encourage individuals to present a marketable “edited

self,” which is “entrepreneurial, positive, informationrich, and self-motivated” (Marwick, 2013, p. 348). Such intensive use of online self-promotion is embedded in the platforms’ business-growth model: Corporate clients, including employers, are interested in leveraging digital displays of users’ personal narratives for purposes of effective targeted advertising (van Dijck, 2013).

In such precarious work relationships, then, workers simultaneously pursue successful careers within their existing employment circumstances and try to avoid organizational changes that they believe might harm them. Therefore, when navigating with these contradictory purposes, they may prefer to avoid public confrontations (Ybema & Horvers, 2017). However, joining a digital campaign entails overt performances, which might compromise workers’ reputation as committed employees (Collinson, 2003). Hence, to gain credibility, participants may adopt a demystification (Goffman, 1959) approach by providing significant personal details about themselves (Vaast, 2007) or performing authenticity through animating “fresh talk” (Goffman, 1981) by displaying “spontaneous, unrehearsed discourse” (Montgomery, 2001, p. 447) and by intentionally risking embarrassment (Schudson, 1984). When participating in digital campaigns, workers may also try to maintain a positive impression by constructing their ideological selves in ways that maximize their right to be heard over that of their contestants (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Claiming a warrant involves displaying better knowledge, reasons, intentions, as well as more passionate engagement (with the cause, others, the organization, etc.) and a higher moral ground (Gergen, 1989). Referring to such selfnarration strategies, I explore how—through digital personal storytelling—workers from both sides of the organizational struggle navigated the tensions of pursuing their individual career ambitions while collectively engaging in overt digital campaigns surrounding controversial employment issues.

## **Method**

### ***Background***

The unionization campaigns I examine were part of a wave of unionization initiatives in Israeli organizations (Weisberg, Bior, & Heruti-Sover, 2013) that emerged against the backdrop of social justice protests in Israel during the summer of 2011, when activists challenged the growing socioeconomic inequality and, among other consequences, their precarious employment terms (Ram & Filc, 2017; Rosenhek & Shalev, 2014). I focus on salaried employees in prominent telecommunication companies—Pelephone, Cellcom, and Partner—that may be characterized by the broad definition of knowledge workers, those “involved in the chain of producing and distributing knowledge products” (Mosco & McKercher, 2008, p. xi). They include professionals in technology, customer service and relations, sales, marketing, logistics, and administration, which enjoy a relatively high degree of privilege and status (Ozana, 2015; Swirski, Konor-Atias, Dagan-Buzaglo, & Lazar-Shoef, 2015).

In the context of the local telecommunication sector, these unionization struggles evolved in resistance to drastic steps of workforce downsizing, pay reductions, and task overloads, which employers took to maintain profitability while facing enhanced market competition. Managements in the three companies aggressively attempted to prevent workers from joining the fledgling unions. Specifically, the vigorous unionization struggle at Pelephone led to a precedent ruling (National Labor Court, 2013) that emphasized the role of communication technologies in union organizing and prohibited managements across the board from formally interfering in such

campaigns. At the same time, there were many workers who personally sided with their employers by explicitly rejecting the idea of unionization. Eventually, during a period of two years, these labor-organizing efforts effectively achieved the purpose of establishing a formal union (Lazar, Ribak, & Davidson, 2020).

### ***The Corpus***

In this study, I conducted an interpretive qualitative analysis of the discourse surrounding personal stories that 52 storytellers (workers who composed their personal stories) shared on four public unionization related Facebook pages: 27 union supporters on three different unionization Facebook pages (five in Pelephone between September and November 2012; Vaad Ovdei Pelephone, n.d.; two in Cellcom in April 2013; Irgun Ovdei Kvutzat Cellcom, n.d.; 20 in Partner between March and August 2014; Hitagdut Ovdei Partner, n.d.; and 25 union opponents in Partner on the anti-unionization Facebook page named “Real Partners”; Partnerim Amityyim, n.d.) in March 2014. Quantitatively, the numbers of storytellers who participated between September 2012 and April 2013 during the pro-union campaigns in Pelephone (five) and Cellcom (two) were trivial. The majority of stories were composed by storytellers during the pro-union (20) and anti-union (25) campaigns taking place in Partner more than a year later. These relatively higher numbers, which could be part of the general rise in activist personal testimony campaigns on social media, may indicate these participants’ intention “not only ‘to be heard’ but also to be ‘counted in’” (Gerbaudo, 2022, p. 12).

In their personal stories, the storytellers provided identifying information about themselves. From their self-presentation, I extracted general details regarding their gender, age, seniority, managerial rank, occupational roles, and family status. The storytellers included 30 men and 22 women (as indicated by their name, photo, and interaction grammar, which in Hebrew reflects the writer’s gender). In 43 stories (83%), the storytellers stated their role in the company, indicating a wide array of occupations. Seventeen storytellers stated they were in managerial rank (nine department managers and eight team leaders), of which 12 (70%) were union opponents. Of the 35 storytellers who did not state managerial rank, 22 (63%) were union supporters. Overall, 24 storytellers (46%) stated their age, which averaged 32 years. Thirtythree storytellers (63%) indicated family status, and 25 (48%) specifically mentioned their spouse and/or children. All but one of the storytellers (98%) stated their seniority with an overall average of seven years and no difference between union supporters and opponents. Throughout the online debates surrounding unionization efforts, workers quite often provided particular details about their professional seniority, department, job, and other aspects. However, for the purpose of this study, I included only texts in which workers narrated their employment experiences in explaining their position for, or against, unionization.

### ***Analytical Approach***

This study examines how workers used the discursive practice of digital personal storytelling during pro-union or anti-union campaigns, comparing and contrasting union supporters and opponents. Addressing the first research question, regarding how page administrators and storytellers reached out to their audiences, I focus on meta-discursive expressions indicating how writers try to engage with their readers by stating their communicative intentions (Hyland, 2005). Hence, I analyze expressions by which writers referred to the use of personal storytelling as part of the digital campaigns. Then, addressing the second research question, regarding

how—based on their own employment experiences and expectations—the storytellers justified their position for, or against, unionization, I analyze expressions by which writers referred to their career, their role in their company, their organization, and their motivation to join the campaign.

The online interactions I study were and still are, at the time of this writing, visible and accessible on public Facebook pages to all users, including academic researchers. Nevertheless, I took measures to conceal the identity of participants: I used pseudonyms in quoting from personal stories, and the translation from Hebrew to English complicated retrieving specific texts. In addition, in the course of time since these events occurred, the risks associated with exposing their participation may reduce.

## **Findings**

### ***Engaging Through Digital Personal Storytelling***

By sharing their personal stories on pro-union or anti-union Facebook campaigns union supporters and opponents alike leveraged the visibility afforded by social media in addressing potential allies across the public, organizational, and private contexts of their lives (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005; Flyverbom, Leonardi, Stohl, & Stohl, 2016). This process included actors assuming two different parts: The Facebook page administrators in promoting and framing workers' personal stories, and the storytellers themselves in composing and sharing their stories. The following analysis examines meta-discursive expressions by which page administrators and storytellers from both sides of the unionization conflict clarified the meanings and purposes of using personal storytelling in their digital campaigns.

#### *The Facebook Page Administrators*

Quite early in the Pelephone unionization Facebook campaign, a page administrator posted the personal story of union supporter Alon with the comment “I simply must share [this story] because these are precisely the feelings and emotions of all the union activists, and I think also of most of the Pelephone workers, and even the managers” (personal communication, September 26, 2012). This Facebook page administrator constructed Alon's storytelling as a representation of widespread pro-union consensus among organizational members and portrayed his own intervention as spontaneously responding to the authentic display of workers' voices rather than as facilitating and orchestrating a predetermined labor-organizing campaign. This practice of placing workers as the main actors on stage was also applied by “Real Partners” Facebook page administrators in the following post: What pride! What a feeling of belonging! So great to be united and to feel the togetherness! Thanks to the devotion of all of us, tens of Real Partners who are proudly wearing an orange color T-shirt with the wording “I too am a Real Partner.” A delightful sight with a clear message—backing the company, rejecting the union! Continuing together with full force, together we are unbreakable! We are inviting you to send your photos wearing the T-shirts, in order to upload on Facebook. (personal communication, March 18, 2014)

Following that call, over the next few days, all the 25 personal stories of union opponents were posted on the “Real Partners” Facebook page, with up to 10 stories in a single day, often including photos of the storytellers wearing the campaign T-shirts. However, notwithstanding such indications of institutional coordination, an analysis of the wording by which page administrators of both pro-union and anti-union Facebook pages referred

to such personal storytelling shows they generally refrained from directing participants to follow a certain form or style in their self-narration. Rather, they portrayed the workers’ stories as displays of individualistic agency.

*The Storytellers*

To create engagement with their readers, both union supporters and opponents composed their personal stories using informal, self-reflexive language in candidly disclosing personal and professional information (Goffman, 1959, 1981; Montgomery, 2001; Schudson, 1984; Vaast, 2007). Union supporter Yaniv actually spelled out such discursive intentions:

I am Yaniv, 29 years and eight days old. Father of Shani who will be six in five days. I am six years and eight months in the company (with half a year break in the middle) and I like to create empathy by providing accurate details about things that are not related to the subject I’m speaking about. And now seriously: These days I work as a professional specialist in the strategic customer department and before that I worked as a service representative for top-priority business clients. (personal communication, August 17, 2014)

In a similar, straightforward manner, union opponent Ronen presented himself, his family, and his career advancement. Furthermore, the inclusion of other Partner employees (his wife, his team members) in his story implies Ronen’s intention to represent them as well:

I am Ronen, age 30, married to Ilana (she too is a Partner employee), and father of two wonderful children, Rotem and Yael. I started working in Partner as a service representative in 2005. I had a very nice history of personal and professional advancement and an amazing development in operational and managerial aspects. Afterwards, I was promoted to a call-center shift manager, then to departmental shift manager, and two years later to divisional coordination and operation manager. Now I manage the Tier-1 team and am proud to lead a team of senior experts, amazing people, but most important—orange [Partner logo color] in their hearts. (personal communication, March 19, 2014)

Table 1 summarizes the type of information the storytellers generally included in their stories. The high frequencies of seniority, role, and career data suggest that the storytellers based their claim to be heard (Gergen, 1989; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) by underlining their professional experience and competence as indicators of their personal contribution as organizational members.

**Table 1. Type of Information the Storytellers Included.**

| Parameter              | Age | Family | Seniority | Role | Career |
|------------------------|-----|--------|-----------|------|--------|
| Number of storytellers | 24  | 33     | 51        | 43   | 41     |
| Frequency              | 46% | 63%    | 98%       | 83%  | 79%    |

***Explaining Pro-Union or Anti-Union Positions***

In their self-narration, the storytellers coped with an inherent tension: The unionization initiative set out to obtain a collective agreement aiming to enhance job security and improve employment terms for all company workers. However, this mission contradicted their neoliberal meritocratic organizational cultures, which emphasized rewarding each worker according to their worth to the company (Fisher & Fisher, 2019). The following analysis examines how, dealing with such tensions, the participants made the case for their respective pro-union or anti-union positions.

### *Union Supporters*

To justify unionization, union supporters emphasized the connections between their own successful careers, the devotion of workers to the company, and its high profits. For example, union supporter Alon linked his professional accomplishments to those of his coworkers who strive to promote Pelephone's market leadership, (referring to the blue color of the company's logo):

My name is Alon, an outstanding worker (according to the certificate I received) and part of an excellent team of workers. A Pelephone worker with over 10 years of seniority. Loving the company with all my body organs. My soul and heart are blue [ . . . ]. My journeys on the company's trails led me to see its beautiful and sublime sides, its workers who are full of motivation, will, and devotion to paint each summit in blue. But regretfully, from the height of my experience, I have also known the less flattering sides, unpaved roads and many obstacles and pits. [ . . . ] Every quarter I enthusiastically await reading the financial report of the company's achievements and each time again I feel proud for our shared accomplishments in strengthening the company as the most profitable and growing in the cellular market. On the other hand, it breaks my heart because the workers do not receive a decent portion of these amazing profits. (personal communication, September 26, 2012)

Alon adopted the prevalent narration of the career as a personal journey, conceptualizing workers as individual agents striving to excel and gain rewards for their investment in precarious organizational and economic environments (Inkson, 2004; Marwick, 2013; Neff, 2012). While Alon emphasized his merit, union supporter Dina addressed the possibility that—even if she excelled—her employment was at risk:

I fear, and I ask: Will I continue at work? Will my chair be in its place tomorrow? Is my employment secured? Even if I excel? Do I have job security? What will happen to me if I lose my job? (personal communication, April 11, 2013)

In a similar way, union supporter Susan justified joining the union by describing how—although she was “truly ‘orange’” [loyal to the Partner brand logo]—the deterioration in employment terms severely impacted her livelihood and prospects:

When Partner recruited me, I felt really proud. I am truly “orange” [ . . . ]. So why unionize? I joined the union because employment terms in the company deteriorated. Over the years, sales objectives have persistently increased. If you don't achieve these objectives, you might lose your job. If you don't sell enough—you get minimum pay only, can't pay your mortgage, and have no future. (personal communication, March 12, 2014)

Alon, Dina, and Susan—each in their own way—expressed disillusion and frustration with their employment situation. They conveyed ambivalence as workers who identify with their employer's brand and aspire to stay and succeed in their career but, at the same time, resist unfavorable changes in organizational policies. Through such repetition in discussing the same personal employment problems, they and other union supporters reemphasized the complex nature of their organizational circumstances (Gerbaudo, 2022).

### *Union Opponents*

Much like union supporters, union opponents reflected on their own journey as company employees. Dan, for example, introduced himself with a photo of his employee badge imprinted with his name, the Partner brand

logo, and the slogan “Orange Family.” He conveyed self-awareness by admitting that, when he joined Partner, he was cynical about the idea of the employer as a family but, as time passed, he changed his mind:

[Day. Month. 2008]. That’s the date I received this badge with the inscription “Orange Family.” Back then I thought to myself: “Seriously? A family?” But a month later and until now whenever I look at my badge, I think to myself: “Wow . . . a Family!” [. . .] undoubtedly these are the most successful, enjoyable, and challenging years of my life. (personal communication, March 19, 2014)

In a similar spirit, union opponent Rose shared a touching story portraying Partner as her companion in moments of grief and joy:

I am Rose, a widow, mother of four children and grandmother of four. 10 years in the company. Partner for me is a family. Partner for me is a home. They always treated me with respect and fairness, even during the difficult days when my husband was ill and when he died, they wrapped me with warmth and love and cared for all my needs. Even for the Shiv’ah [the Jewish mourning gathering] they took care of supplying beverages, cookies, and all other needs. I am proud to work here. There is no one happier than me when my grandchildren come to company events and see with their own eyes what an amazing place employs their grandmother. (personal communication, March 19, 2014)

Referring to the company as a family, union opponent Batia also made the connection between her private family and her professional advancement:

I am part of the orange family already eight years. The most significant eight years of my life, eight years in which I have developed in the professional and personal aspects and have also created my private family. When I say orange family, I mean a caring and attendant company, a company that endlessly invests in its workers—it is not trivial that we are the best company to work at!!! So, whoever thought to insert foreign elements into the family, we are not interested. (personal communication, March 23, 2014)

Batia based her claims on the company’s leadership in the “Best Place to Work” arena, perhaps referring to the annual survey rating of employers in Israel, which ranked the parameters of salary, job security, and stability, as most important for employees in evaluating their workplace (Heruti-Sover, 2015). In a similar manner, union opponent Tamir explained the destructive consequences of unionization:

During my time in the company, I understood that Partner is not just another company to work at, Partner is a Family [. . .]. A union will create a different reality, intrigues, conspiracies, schemes, and splits. In short: It will harm the Partner family!!! You do not insert a union into the family!!! (personal communication, March 19, 2014)

Dan, Rose, Batia, and Tamir each described how, based on their personal experience, they came to recognize the unique advantages of belonging to the “Partner family,” which was threatened by the external force of unionization.

Table 2 summarizes how participants narrated their stories about their careers, their roles in the company, their organization, and their motivation in joining the campaign. It demonstrates intrinsic contradictions in both pro-union and anti-union arguments: Union supporters advocated collective action but justified their position using individualistic and meritocratic values, whereas union opponents rejected collective labor organizing but emphasized values of organizational belonging and caring.

**Table 2. Key Arguments in Explaining Pro-Union and Anti-Union Positions.**

| Self-Narration         | Union Supporters         | Union Opponents          |
|------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| My career              | Challenging journey      | Steady advancement       |
| My role in the company | I produce value          | I am a family member     |
| My organization        | Disappoints me           | Encourages me            |
| My motivation          | Improve employment terms | Protect employment terms |

**Discussion**

By examining workers’ personal storytelling on Facebook campaigns supporting or opposing unionization efforts in three leading Israeli telecommunication companies, this study sheds light on the intertwined tensions of collective action in contemporary neoliberal societies: Government policies, labor market dynamics, organizational cultures, and the business model of social media platforms concurrently encourage workers to promote a neoliberal self that is individualistic, autonomous, entrepreneurial, and risk-taking. Social activism, on the other hand, involves relying on others in striving for a common good. This complexity surfaced in how the participants engaged in the digital campaigns surrounding unionization initiatives.

In their online engagement, participants in the examined campaigns carefully integrated commercial and activist forms of self-presentation in ways that indicate the ambivalence that knowledge workers experience when they overtly take sides in labor struggles (Mumby et al., 2017; Salamon, 2022). Since their personal stories were posted by proxy—through the mediation of Facebook page administrators— the storytellers’ online involvement remained visible mainly within the specific event of their unionization struggle, and thus they were able to grapple with the phenomenon of context collapse across different audiences (Marwick & boyd, 2010). That is, the personal stories they contributed to the unionization-related digital campaigns appeared separately from the online identities that these individuals may have constructed for themselves using their own social media accounts (Marwick, 2015). This distinction between their online personal and professional profiles and their unionization-related interaction allowed participants to introduce themselves in creative ways, thus conveying their enthusiastic involvement. By doing so, they signaled individual autonomy rather than mere compliance with the directives of union organizers or management. While their authorship may be perceived as a writer’s genuine beliefs and intentions, the employer brand endorsement—which both union opponents and supporters expressed— illuminates how workers in neoliberal economies bear the responsibility for protecting the image of their workplace (Neff, 2012).

This practice of placing the workers at the front of unionization campaigns (Bonilla, 2011; Brimeyer et al., 2004; Cloud, 2005; Pasquier et al., 2020) coincides with the neoliberal settings of the struggle: Given the decreasing levels of union density, labor organizers rely on showcasing the personal qualities of their activists more than on overall membership numbers (Mundlak, 2020). However, such public demonstrations of workers’ personal involvement in organizational resistance might be moderated by the technological affordances of the platform that labor organizers use. On Facebook, as means of self-promotion, users shape their uniform online persona by displaying “multiple ‘stories’ about themselves, each story concerning different parts of their identities

and addressing a limited audience” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 211). My analysis suggests that while personal storytelling served union supporters in advocating unionization, they narrated their stories as part of promoting their “employable self” (Gershon, 2014, 2017).

The analysis of workers’ participation in the “Real Partners” anti-unionization digital campaign also indicates backstage orchestration of individualistic performances: Given the abovementioned court ruling, managements were obligated to refrain from overt involvement in the online unionization debate. Therefore, managers were more likely to urge workers to individually present their opposition to labor organizing, partaking in counter-unionization digital campaigns. In this situation, the “Real Partners” Facebook page administrators perhaps tried to create the impression that the personal stories were shared as genuine and spontaneous reactions of workers who actively rejected the notion of unionization and voluntarily pledged loyalty to their employer.

The examination of how participants explained their choice to support or oppose the unionization efforts suggests that union supporters and opponents alike presented their contradictory arguments without challenging the shared common sense of their cultural and economic environments (Billig et al., 1988). The difference was that union supporters conceptualized their activism as an opportunity for obtaining better employment terms, whereas union opponents defined unionization as a threat to preserving the advantages they already achieved. While union supporters shared their career accomplishments and livelihood anxieties as means of justifying their participation in collective organizational resistance, union opponents highlighted management’s part in ensuring their long-term occupational development and well-being. Furthermore, at that time, workers in the Israeli telecommunication sector generally tended to dismiss the idea of trade unions, which they considered to be corrupt, fossilized, and bureaucratic (Preminger, 2018). This may explain why supporters distanced themselves from the problematic attributes associated with unions, drawing on images of entrepreneurship and market leadership that might better convince their audience, and opponents emphasized how unionizing would disrupt the success of both the workers and the company.

In their self-narrations, union supporters and opponents alike performed the modern model of life stories through which people present themselves to others as unique and genuine individuals who are striving to actualize their authentic selves (Fernandes, 2017; Linde, 1993). The storytellers emphasized their own success—underlining their achievements, aspirations, as well as the opportunities that they were given or denied by their current employer—as a starting point for justifying or rejecting unionization. By accentuating personal experience and sincere emotions, they could appeal to their audiences, create a sense of togetherness, and yet bypass the difficult discussion about the complex problems of their precarious employment. Particularly, through personal storytelling, union supporters were able to convey the unpopular ideas of labor organizing while they stay aligned with the neoliberal settings of their organization. They could simultaneously challenge existing power relations and reproduce them “in a single act of resistance” (Mumby et al., 2017, p. 1161).

The individualistic discursive practice of digital personal storytelling may seem inconsistent with the basic function of a union, which is to express the collective voice of all workers (Freeman & Medoff, 1984). However, as my findings suggest, the use of contemporary social media, which elicits performances of personal success and encourages individuals to focus on their own passions, may serve the aspirations of labor movements. Such

personalized actions of individuals have the potential to inspire others and increase engagement among participants as they face their shared problems (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Ganz, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

Looking forward, as individuals are increasingly engaging in digital social movements, performing activism emerges as a component in crafting a desirable online professional identity (Raun & ChristensenStrynø, 2021). Therefore, it is plausible that workers may be more open to partake in overt digital campaigns that position them as pursuing collective good. Furthermore, with the growing exposure of organizational struggles on public social media, workers are drawn to personally interact in online deliberations surrounding crucial social and economic issues that directly affect their job security and professional prospects (Lazar, 2022). In this process, workers may adopt the discursive practice of digital personal storytelling as they reflect on the ways in which their own career might be influenced by such events. Hence, as a practical implication of this study, labor organizers and managements are advised to take these entwined undercurrents and the tensions they entail into account when leveraging social media in general—and particularly digital personal storytelling—as means of mobilizing workers in contemporary activist and organizational communication arenas.

Further research, then, should follow up by exploring how the evolving online practices of both selfpromotion and grassroots activism continue to shape the nature of participation in organizational conflicts in different contexts. At the same time, scholars and professionals may consider how performances of digital personal storytelling surface and develop not only in crisis situations, such as bottom-up organizational resistance, but also how they are manifested by different participants as part of everyday uses of organizational communication genres, as well as how they may potentially shape common routines and norms of self-narration in various organizational settings.

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