Chapter V

Negotiating Workplace Surveillance

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Abstract

In this chapter, we explore the ways that employees at a large, corporate retail store consent to and challenge the in-store video surveillance system they confront in their workplace and how these negotiations are shaped by and incorporated into the workers local “idioculture”. Our analysis highlights several important themes, including how workers perceive the use of surveillance and how they respond to new surveillance technologies. We focus on how these aspects of worker idioculture are, in part, a product of what employees believe to be morally acceptable uses of technology and their experiences with the older system they had come to know. In addition, we examine the ways that employees negotiate around the edges of store surveillance and, in some cases, actually use the system to reinforce the idiocultural norms of the “productive worker”.

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The increased use of computer and surveillance technologies in the workplace has exposed workers throughout the entire occupational structure to heightened levels of monitoring and scrutiny. Telephone operators routinely have conversations recorded. Restaurant workers wear beepers that literally prod them through their shift. Bookstore clerks don wireless headsets so they can stock shelves and answer phones and queries at the same time. Delivery people, auto-rental check-in clerks, parking-meter readers, and a host of others carry data-entry computers. In fact, according to an annual survey by the American Management Association (AMA, 2001) more than three-quarters of major U.S. firms (77.7%) record and review employee communications and activities on the job, including their phone calls, e-mail, Internet connections, and computer files. This percentage has doubled since 1997. Not only are some of these technologies used to “help” workers be “more efficient,” but also to monitor their movements and/or keep track of their productivity. Such uses have implications for the privacy rights of workers as well as the dehumanization and deskilling of work, even in those occupations regarded as “unskilled.”

As we have argued elsewhere (Staples, 2000), contemporary forms of surveillance and social control tend to be systematic, methodical, and automatic in operation. It is likely to be impersonal in that the “observer” is rarely seen, is anonymous, and is likely to be a computer system, a video cam, a drug-testing kit, or an electronic scanner of some kind. Once more, the data that these devices collect may become part of a permanent record in the form of videotape, a computer database, or some other digital format. These new meticulous rituals of power often appear as the technological progeny of the “Panopticon” (Bentham, 1995; Foucault, 1977; Staples, 2000) in that they often operate in a hidden or random fashion, leaving those under their scrutiny supposedly internalizing the “gaze” of the authorities and thus rendering themselves docile.

A number of social theorists have argued that surveillance is replacing bureaucratization as the driving force in the rationalization of everyday life and work (Bogard, 1996; Lyon, 1994; Poster, 1990; Sewell, 1998). When applied in the workplace, electronic systems of surveillance and monitoring may attempt to control and manipulate workers’ behaviors and job performances through their own self-monitoring and discipline. In addition, workers may be subordinated by means of systems that rationalize their skill and knowledge about the labor process and transfer it to management in order to ensure both their acquiescence and replaceability (Braverman, 1974; Staples & Staples, 2001). Both of these strategies are centered on efficiency and control and both rely on the close observation and inspection of the labor process.
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