

Evaluate the argument that the workplace is increasingly becoming a site of surveillance. You should illustrate your answer with case studies either from the literature or as a critical reflection on your own work experience.

The Workplace as a Site of Surveillance

The workplace has traditionally comprised a site of observation and regulation, and surveillance has taken intensified forms in recent decades. Recent advances in digital technologies have made surveillance more pervasive and extensive. In this essay, the argument that the workplace is increasingly becoming a site of surveillance will be evaluated. First, theoretical approaches to surveillance and control will be examined. Secondly, examples of the extension of surveillance will be discussed. Finally, the extent to which the workplace is increasingly becoming a site of surveillance will be evaluated.

Theoretical Approaches to Surveillance and Control

An early approach to surveillance and control in the workplace is presented by Frederick Taylor, who focused on improving industrial efficiency through scientific methods such as open-plan offices and breaking down tasks into simple steps (Konuk et al., 2023). More recently, this approach has been applied to the rise of “digital Taylorism,” in which algorithmic tools measure and optimise performance in ways reminiscent of Taylor’s approach to scientific management (Cole et al., 2021).

Michel Foucault presents an analysis of management and control, particularly through his use of the panopticon metaphor. Foucault (1977) describes how the possibility of constant observation leads individuals to regulate their own behaviour even when no one is watching. For example, the use of open-plan offices means that people always have the possibility of being watched, and so change their behaviour. Further insights are provided by Braverman (1998), who argues that this process is a key part of capitalist management that involves the systematic deskilling and control of workers, frequently through the closer monitoring of labour.

Case Studies of Workplace Surveillance

A widely discussed example of contemporary workplace surveillance is Amazon's warehouse system. Employees use handheld scanners and wearable devices that log each item picked and track workers' movements through the warehouse (West, 2019). In this case, the 'time off task' is calculated to the second, which can then trigger automatic disciplinary warnings. This has been described as a kind of digital Taylorism that involves workers being subjected to constant scrutiny, which, in turn, results in high levels of anxiety (Cant, 2019). These practices are defended by Amazon as being necessary for improved efficiency and customer satisfaction (West, 2019). However, this example suggests that the use of technology to monitor workplace performance in detail on an individual worker basis extends surveillance to a much greater level than is possible under earlier technological regimes.

Call centres provide a further example of increasing surveillance, with Fernie and Metcalf (1998) describing them as 'electronic panopticons.' Call-centre employees know their calls may be recorded, their time between calls measured, and their conversational scripts analysed. Even without direct managerial supervision, workers alter their behaviour because of the ever-present possibility of surveillance (Fernie and Metcalf, 1998). This kind of oversight not only enforces productivity but also standardises emotional labour, limiting workers' autonomy in their interactions with customers.

From some perspectives, surveillance has been intensified as a result of COVID-19, which made remote working widespread. There was an increase in the use of so-called "bossware" such as Hubstaff or Time Doctor, which track keystrokes, take random screenshots, and log time spent on applications (Ball, 2021). Due to the increase in remote working, such platforms became more widespread, which could be argued as a shift from physical oversight in the office to technological oversight; however, the technological oversight is more intrusive and affects individuals more directly and in their domestic settings rather than just their workspaces.

The rise of platform-based gig work also indicates a rise in the range of surveillance. Uber drivers and Deliveroo couriers are tracked via GPS, rated by customers, and subject to opaque algorithmic management systems. Wood et al. (2019) show that such forms of management not only monitor

employee performance but also gatekeep access to work itself, since those with lower ratings may be excluded from future opportunities. This encourages workers to adapt by “gaming” the system, such as accepting undesirable jobs to boost acceptance rates or selectively interacting with customers (Wood et al., 2019). In this case, the role of surveillance governs the experience of the workers and prevents their autonomy in accepting the kind of work that would support them.

Evaluating the Extent of Surveillance

The workplace has traditionally been a site of surveillance, with the factory floor or office layout helping to facilitate managerial oversight. Technology such as clocking in, timed breaks, and other surveillance methods has long been used to ensure that workers are overlooked (Ball, 2021). Therefore, it can be argued that the focus on surveillance in the workplace has not changed. However, the extent of surveillance can be seen as increasing as a consequence of the burgeoning availability of app and online-based technology in working from home and in app-based gig jobs such as Deliveroo or Wolt (Can, 2019). From a managerial perspective, data-driven monitoring is framed as an objective and efficient way to evaluate performance. However, keystroke monitors and random desktop photographs mean that surveillance is becoming more detailed and extending to more than simply the physical observation of workers.

A counter-argument that workplace surveillance is not expanding is that it reflects the nature of work since the Industrial Revolution. Whereas previous forms of workplace observation depended upon observing whether the worker completed the job, and was thus achievable through physical oversight, much of worker activity takes place out of sight; for example, it can be difficult to observe what workers are completing on their computers or to monitor delivery drivers (Ball, 2021). Therefore, it can be argued that in some ways, workers are no less scrutinised than the ironworkers of the nineteenth century, but the nature of the work has changed the way in which this takes place. The use of wearable devices to monitor workers in spaces such as Amazon warehouses facilitates the oversight that was previously undertaken by foremen or other workers; the process is more efficient, but qualitatively the same (West, 2019).

Personal Reflection

In my experience of office-based work, I note that some platforms that are intended to support collaborations, such as Microsoft Teams or Slack, can provide oversight and scrutiny. These platforms display the “last active” indicators, read receipts, and the activity logs of users. Such features provide a sense of ambient visibility that can be compared to Foucault’s (1977) panopticon, in that one can never be entirely sure if one is being observed, but the possibility of observation encourages responsiveness. This provides a sense in which the uncertainty of being observed results in behaviour that responds to this possibility. This can be seen as a way of nudging employees to appear constantly available.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the argument that the workplace is increasingly a site of surveillance is a persuasive one. First, the extension into workers’ domestic areas through keyboard monitoring and remote cameras would seem to be beyond what was previously employed. Secondly, the automation of some forms of control, such as that using apps for gig workers, has the effect of increasing the range of control on their behaviour. Thirdly, even in warehouses, the monitoring of worker performance has been completed with greater detail and attention to minutiae than was previously the case. Therefore, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the workplace has increasingly become a site of surveillance.

References

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