

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

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The workplace has ~~always been a~~traditionally comprised a site of observation and regulation, ~~and but in recent decades~~ surveillance has intensified and taken intensified forms in recent decades new forms. ~~Recent a~~Managers have long monitored workers to ensure productivity, compliance, and safety. However, ~~A~~advances in digital technologies, ~~big data analytics, and algorithmic management~~ have made surveillance more granular, pervasive, and difficult for workers to resist 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 considered.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. This essay evaluates the argument that the workplace is increasingly becoming a site of surveillance, drawing on key theoretical perspectives and contemporary case studies, before offering a critical reflection on the implications for workers and organisations alike.

Theoretical aApproaches to Surveillance and Control in Theory

An early approach to surveillance and control in the workplace is presented by Frederick Taylor, who focused on improving industrial efficiency through the use of 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 throughTheorists of work and organisation have long highlighted the centrality of control in the labour process. Michel Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary power, particularly his use of the panopticon metaphor, is

~~instructive here. In *Discipline and Punish*, 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 Surveillance thus functions as a subtle but powerful mechanism of discipline. Similarly, Harry Braverman (1974), who argues that this process is a key part of capitalist management that involves the~~ ~~argued in his labour process theory that capitalist management relies on the~~ systematic deskilling and control of workers, ~~often through technologies that allow~~ frequently through the closer monitoring of labour.

~~More recently, scholars have described the rise of “digital Taylorism,” whereby algorithmic tools measure and optimise performance in ways reminiscent of Frederick Taylor’s early twentieth-century scientific management. These frameworks help us to understand how contemporary surveillance practices are embedded in broader dynamics of control and power in the workplace.~~

Case Studies of Workplace Surveillance

~~Perhaps the most widely~~ 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 Algorithms calculate “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 sometimes down to the second, and can automatically trigger disciplinary warnings. For critics, this amounts to a form of digital Taylorism that subjects workers to constant scrutiny, encouraging a climate of fear and exhaustion (Cant, 2019). Such~~ These practices are defended by Amazon ~~defends these practices as being necessary for improved efficiency and customer satisfaction (West, 2019). However, this example suggests that the use of technology to monitor workplace performance to in detail on an individual worker basis extends surveillance to a much greater level than is possible under earlier technological regimes. (West, 2019), essential for efficiency and customer satisfaction, but the trade-off between productivity and employee wellbeing remains contentious.~~

Call centres provide ~~a further example of increasing surveillance, with another classic case.~~ Research by Fernie and Metcalf (1998) ~~famously described~~ describing them as “electronic panopticons.” ~~Call-centre e~~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 ~~monitoring~~ surveillance (Fernie and Metcalf, 1998). This kind of ~~surveillance 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 the COVID-19 pandemic intensified debates around surveillance as which made~~ remote working ~~became~~ widespread. ~~There was an increase in the use of~~ Employers increasingly turned to so-called “bossware” such as Hubstaff or Time Doctor, which track keystrokes, take random screenshots, and log time spent on applications. ~~These tools extend managerial oversight into private spaces, and for many employees, the use of these approaches felt like the erosion of trust. Ostensibly introduced to maintain accountability, such tools often blur the line between work and home life, extending managerial oversight into private spaces. For many employees, this shift felt like an erosion of trust, as surveillance replaced output-based assessments with invasive scrutiny of digital activity (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. ~~Beyond traditional employment, platform-based gig work demonstrates how surveillance can be algorithmic, invisible, and constant.~~ Uber drivers and Deliveroo couriers are tracked via GPS, rated by customers, and subject to opaque algorithmic management systems. Research by Wood et al. (2019) shows ~~how such “algorithmic that such forms of management”~~ not only monitors ~~employee~~ performance but also ~~governs gatekeeps~~ access to work itself, since those with lower ratings may be excluded from future ~~jobs opportunities~~. ~~This encourages w~~Workers to ~~often~~ adapt by “gaming” the system, ~~such as m~~—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. s— but the asymmetry of power between workers and platforms is stark.

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 have 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). Supporters of workplace surveillance argue that it brings real benefits. Monitoring can ensure safety, accountability, and quality. GPS tracking of delivery drivers, for example, may provide reassurance in the event of accidents. Recording calls in customer service allows disputes to be fairly resolved. 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 means 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 expandingtending 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).

However, the range by which surveillance takes place does appear to be extended beyond that which was previously the case. First, the extension into workers' domestic areas through keyboard

~~monitoring and remote cameras would seem to be beyond that which 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 the case; for example monitoring the time taken for each trip is now possible for hundreds of workers at the same time, whereas there were physical limitations in how much oversight an individual manager or foreman could exercise.~~

However, critics stress the costs. Surveillance can erode trust between employers and employees, replacing professional autonomy with micromanagement. It risks creating cultures of anxiety and stress, with negative consequences for mental health, job satisfaction, and staff retention. Privacy is also a major concern, particularly when surveillance technologies extend into the home or when data collected on workers is stored indefinitely. Moreover, the asymmetry of control—where employers collect, analyse, and act on data that employees cannot access or challenge—reinforces existing power inequalities in the workplace.

These dynamics highlight that surveillance is not simply a neutral tool but a social process that reflects wider power relations. In practice, workers often resist or negotiate surveillance. Warehouse employees may find ways to “slow down” without triggering penalties; call centre staff may subvert scripts while still satisfying performance metrics; gig workers exchange strategies for manipulating algorithms. Such acts of resistance underscore that surveillance is contested, rather than absolute.

Personal Reflection

~~In my experience of office-based work, I note that some platforms that are intended to support collaborations, such as~~ In my own experience of office-based work, I have encountered subtler forms of digital surveillance. Collaboration platforms 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. While ostensibly designed to support communication, these~~ Such features ~~create a form of~~ 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, ~~∴ one is never~~

entirely sure who is watching, but the possibility of observation encourages responsiveness. This dynamic resonates strongly with Foucault's notion of the panopticon, where the uncertainty of being observed is itself a form of control. 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 ~~While less intrusive than warehouse scanners or bossware, these practices still shape behaviour, nudging employees to~~ appear constantly available.

Conclusion

In conclusion, tThe 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 that which 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.

Across various diverse contexts, including from Amazon warehouses, and call centres, to remote home offices and gig platforms, there has been an extension of monitoring technologies in ways that have become more pervasive. technologies of monitoring have become more pervasive, data-driven, and algorithmic. While employers justify these practices in terms of efficiency, safety, and accountability, the broader picture suggests an expansion of managerial control at the expense of worker autonomy and privacy. Therefore, although the desire to extend the oversight over workers is not a new managerial impulse, the ways in which this is being achieved has become more pervasive and, in this sense, the workplace is increasingly a site of surveillance. The challenge for the future lies in finding ways to balance legitimate organisational needs with respect for dignity, trust, and fairness in the employment relationship. Regulation, transparency, and dialogue between employers and workers will be essential if surveillance is not to become the defining feature of twenty-first-century work.

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