



Assessing the effects of ‘big brother’ in a workplace: The case of WAST



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ABSTRACT

The extensive and growing use of electronic performance monitoring in organisations has resulted in considerable debate over the years. This paper focuses on workplace monitoring at the Welsh Ambulance Services Trust (WAST), a provider of emergency services for the people of Wales, in the UK. The key objectives include examining the nature of performance monitoring at its call centres and determining whether employees are micromanaged through the use of workplace surveillance. The findings cover staff (both management and non-management) perceptions, gathered through a questionnaire and interviews as well as observations made in the study areas. The findings revealed that workplace electronic monitoring is not intrinsically all good or all bad. It is value neutral and offers a win–win situation.

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Introduction

It has been estimated that the average person in a major UK city is seen on closed circuit television (CCTV) between 8 and 300 times every day (Biressi & Nunn, 2003). Though there is nothing new in individual or societal surveillance, the intensity and the way surveillance or monitoring is carried out often draws in a lot of concerns. In recent years, many workers have also been subjected to high levels of monitoring (Smith, 2007). Early accounts of large-scale organisations emphasis how the development of information ‘systems’ gave businesses the ability to police their internal structures on a grand scale and gain competitive advantage (Ball, 2010). The monitoring, as Sewell (1999) argues, may be couched in the language of performance monitoring, and annual appraisals. In spite of that, it is invariably dependent on some form of surveillance. ‘big brother’ which metaphorically denotes a term for surveillance, represents the tremendous capabilities technology has provided for employers to keep track of what their work force is up to these days.

The paper begins with a discussion on the controversy surrounding the terms, ‘monitoring and surveillance’. These have been used interchangeably although many writers now tend to draw a distinction between them. The paper also uses the term, ‘big brother’, which is perhaps the most popular contemporary metaphor used to describe surveillance. The use of that expression in popular culture as a term for shadowing, scrutinising or tailing cannot be overstated. The methodology adopted for the study and the findings follow next in order followed by a conclusion.

Employee monitoring or surveillance?

Employee monitoring is the act of watching and monitoring employees’ actions during working hours using employer equipment/property (Raposa & Mujtaba, 2003). Yet, if such monitoring were being done to uncover specific wrongdoing, then it can be classified as surveillance (D’Urso, 2006). Hence, monitoring can be seen as surveillance to others as the lines between the two are seemingly blurred. Although both terms ‘employee monitoring’ or ‘employee surveillance’ have been used interchangeably, it is important to have a thorough understanding of these two distinct terms which seem to be clouded by terminological ambiguity.

According to Botan and Vorvoreanu (2000), the term, ‘monitoring’ is generic and can be applied to all automated collection of information about work, regardless of purpose, whilst surveillance, on the other hand, more narrowly refers to a relationship between some authority and those whose behaviour it wishes to control. Ball (2010), meanwhile, notes that while monitoring and surveillance denote similar practices and both can have positive and negative consequences, they have different connotations to their audiences. She notes the connotative differences between psychologists and sociologists on the issue and stresses that the connotative differences and their associated epistemological and political commitments serve to split research on workplace surveillance in an unhelpful way.

Although a large span of explanations have been offered for these two terms by some researchers, what is clear, however, is that apart from the fact that monitoring and surveillance have different connotations to their audiences, each can be used benignly depending on one’s viewpoint. This paper uses both terms to describe the kind of activities that are observed at the workplace. We used the two terms interchangeably in order to feed into the

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two viewpoints. The tag, 'big brother' refers to an authoritative force that exerts or seeks to exert some authority on people. The term originates from George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four novel and its fictitious character 'big brother' who was used to intimidate citizens into believing that their movement was being monitored. In the book, the concept of 'big brother' loomed largely. It was an omniscient, ever present, somewhat malicious overseer and has become a popular euphemism for Britain's comprehensive system of surveillance cameras. It connotes activities that are perceived to intrude into people's lives. 'big brother' is, thus, synonymous with any activity that seeks to curtail the freedom of individuals or society as a whole.

An overview

The use of technology in workplaces for the protection and monitoring of staff has increased over the past years and this has particularly been helped by organisational computer networks and the use of hidden 'clickstream data' derived from internet browsing where control aspects are disguised (Haggerty & Gazso, 2005; Regan, 2002). According to the American Management Association (AMA, 2001) electronic surveillance of employees has been increasing every year. The resort to technology has helped management to manage workers without the need for direct supervision as would have occurred under a Fordist assembly line where staff were closely watched by supervisors on the assembly line. Nolan (2003) for instance, sees the use of technology in monitoring as just a natural evolution of the old assembly lines. He draws similarities with the Fordist assembly lines where staff were watched closely by supervisors on the assembly line. The difference between traditional monitoring by a visible supervisor and today's monitoring is that, there is no need for a physical presence of anyone. So today's supervisor might not even be visible but can record employees' movement and productivity quite easily.

Some of the most common reasons for employee monitoring include performance reviews; legal compliance, and cost control (AMA, 2001). Other reasons that have often been cited include protection of business information, security and safety. A number of these technologies involve the use of door swipes, CCTV, telephony adherence and activity reports, computer log-in and activity reports, printer and photocopier log-in details. The Automatic Caller Display (ACD) software is also used extensively in call centres. This is used to monitor call volumes, customer service advisor availability, duration of calls, duration of agents' 'idle' time in between calls and how many calls each agent takes. Other firms also require knowledge of the amount of time available for incoming calls. This enables the organisations to forecast successfully for the number of staff they need to answer the expected call volume and also to meet the required service level agreements.

The reliance on technology in call centres provides for effective operations and considerable checks on staff. But management of such centres also face a myriad of problems, particularly, concerning motivation and commitment, labour turnover, the effectiveness of supervision and the delivery of quality performance often due to staff's concern over extensive mechanisms of monitoring or surveillance. No sector of British industry has attracted more publicity in recent months than 'call centre' operations (Taylor & Bain, 1999). They have been portrayed, for example, as the new 'dark satanic mills' (see IDS, 1997: 13). The fact is that the integration of telephone and computer technologies, which defines the call centre, has produced new developments in the Taylorisation of white-collar work (Taylor & Bain, 1999).

Ball (2010) acknowledges that the widest range of monitoring techniques can be found in the service sector, although manufacturing and some primary industries also monitor their employees.

In the United States alone, it is estimated that around 20 million workers are electronically monitored on the job, with nine out of every ten companies checking up on their employees' online activities while at work (Hofmann et al., 2003). The term, 'big brother' aptly describes the present situation (Schulman, 2001). At present, 'big brother' style technologies are now watching half of the UK's employees fuelling fear and stress in the workplace (Silicon.com., 2011). This has even incurred the wrath of union leaders who feel high technologies are used as a weapon to control the workplace and watch its workers (Lee, 2007).

Monitoring and surveillance do not only undermine workers' rights to privacy, they can also create high levels of stress and anxiety leading to ill-health and poor performance, according to the British trade union, *Amicus* (Amicus Guide, 2005). Some studies, meanwhile, have linked anxiety, depression, and nervous disorders to the stress induced by workplace monitoring. Hence, those who are monitored are believed to be constantly apprehensive and inhibited due to the constant presence of an unseen audience (Ariss et al., 2002). In spite of this apprehension, there have always been legitimate reasons and justifications for workplace monitoring. A number of reasons often cited for this are that monitoring can lead to an increase in productivity, reduce absenteeism and ensure the security of staff and site and health and safety issues.

Employers' rationale for surveillance

Indeed, employers have always gathered information about their employees over many years. In recent years, however, advances in technology have been dramatic, and have facilitated information gathering in ways that in the past employers could never have imagined possible (Hoffman et al., 2003). Kizza and Ssanyu (2005) have attributed the growth of employee monitoring to the plummeting price of and sophistication of technology, the diminishing size of monitoring products making them easier to conceal, the increased use of email and internet in the workplace and the belief that monitored staff are more productive. On his part, Mujtaba (2003) argues that employee monitoring has become more widespread due to the increase in cyberloafing and lawsuits. Lim (2002) carried out a study of self-identified 'cyberloafers' and found that they did not just do it out of boredom or laziness but also as an act of defiance against their employers.

Staff monitoring has become quite expedient too because of instances in which employees have been found to be sending confidential information and corporate trade secrets to friends, family, competitors, vendors, suppliers and customers and consequently harming employers in terms of profits and market share (Gahtan, 1997). Beyond that, employers have legitimate concerns about the use of e-mail in thefts of proprietary information, which is understood to account for more than \$2 billion in losses a year. According to a study conducted by the ePolicy Institute, '85% of employees admitted to recreational surfing at work, 70% of employees admitted to receiving or sending adult-orientated personal emails and 60% admitted to exchanging emails that could be considered racist, sexist or politically incorrect' (elronsw.com., 1999). *Employee Monitoring Solutions* (2002) has also reported that 30–40% of internet use in the workplace is not related to business. It also notes that employee internet shopping at work increased from 12% in 1999 to almost 25% in 2001. It attributed this to the fact that on-line shoppers like the convenience of the faster connection speed often available from the workplace. According to *Vanson Bourne Consultancy* (2001) the UK workforce spends on average around two hours dealing with e-mails every working day. In the US, out of 1000 American workers surveyed in 2002, it was revealed that 64% of those with internet access tend to use it for personal use during working hours (Lim, 2002).

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