Chapter 5
The Electronic Panopticon:
Organizational Surveillance in Virtual Work

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ABSRACT

This chapter explores the role of surveillance in virtual work. With the modern societal shift as well as the increased global market, working virtually is becoming more necessary and even a requirement at times. With the removal of physical interaction, questions of how to properly ensure productivity arise. This chapter suggests the panopticon, as developed by Bentham (1791) and expounded upon by Foucault (1977), is very influential in the surveillance of virtual activity. This chapter will ultimately explore theoretical underpinnings of the panopticon, work place surveillance, virtual surveillance in practice, ethical issues created by virtual surveillance, and consequences of virtual surveillance.

INTRODUCTION

George Orwell, in his landmark book *1984*, wrote about a futuristic world that was fully controlled by the government through surveillance. The premise was that no actions occurred in society without the government's or "Big Brother's" awareness. This awareness was achieved by a constant and overt gaze. Although not quite to the extremes as Orwell described in his fictional book, the increasing role of surveillance in contemporary society .is well established and engrained in individuals' daily lives.

Information technology (IT) fosters an environment where surveillance can flourish, and as will be explored here, working virtually is an ideal platform for organizational control and close monitoring of employees' communication and behavior.

The rapid and vast proliferations of Internet-based technologies in the workplace have provided prime opportunities for employers to (in) directly monitor the communication activities and behaviors of its employees, in both professional and personal spaces. Orthmann (1998) reported that at least two-thirds of organizations have integrated some type of employee monitoring and surveillance technology in their operations (e.g. computer,

email, video monitoring). This technology, also known as employee monitoring and surveillance technologies (MST), is used to measure, shape, and/or control the behavior of employees. Details of sales, deliveries, contact with customers, phone calls, time taken to complete tasks are routinely logged on computer systems and the information used by bosses to evaluate their staff and make sure performance targets are hit (Telegraph.co.uk, Jan. 2008). Employee surveillance is so pervasive in the workplace that one study found managers in a fifth of British workplaces admit to monitoring their employees using computer-based systems (Telegraph, Jan 09, 2008). The structure of the contemporary workplace, with the integration of computers and IT systems and more individuals working remotely and virtually, increases the likelihood that organizations will track employees' workplace and personal communications and behaviors in both overt and covert ways.

The organizational discourse framing the use of MST is compelling. Implementing technology in the workplace has some real advantages: increased productivity, rapid access to robust and timely information, increased safety with video surveillance, theft deterrence, prompts good behavior (e.g., this call is being recorded "for training purposes"), objective evidence of productivity (number of sales, etc.) and curtailing inappropriate uses of the electronic equipment, email and the Internet. However, there are some striking disadvantages of utilizing information technology, mainly MST in the workplace including, but not limited to: potential invasion of privacy, lowering of morale, inhibition of creativity for fear of retribution for not following protocol, reduction of agency, and the blurring of personal and professional boundaries with the ubiquitous use of social networking platforms by individuals and organizations alike.

It must be noted that organizational surveillance is not a new phenomenon. Employee and individual monitoring by organizations has a long and storied history. This chapter provides a brief historical glimpse at organizational surveillance; carries forward historical conceptual and theoretical aspects of surveillance to assist in framing the use of MST in organizations today; discusses employee resistance of information technology and surveillance; and concludes with practical, relational and theoretical implications of the use of technology in the workplace and the surveillance implications.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Bentham and Foucault's concept of the panopticon provides a useful framework to ground the discussion of surveillance in the workplace. The panopticon is a prison building developed by Jeremy Bentham, an English philosopher and social theorist in 1785. Bentham (1791) developed the panopticon as an apparent omnipresence for prisoners where the hope was that if prisoners were under constant surveillance, they would behave more appropriately. In Bentham's prison, a guard tower equipped with venetian blinds was to stand in the center of the windowed cells armed with a guard for surveillance. This constant source of surveillance was hypothesized to produce better behavior from prisoners. Bentham's ultimate goal was for the guard tower to become a reminder of surveillance so prisoners would begin to practice self surveillance. The threat of the guard would eventually be enough by itself, removing the need for an actual physical presence in the tower. The prisoners' belief that there was a guard would produce the desired results. Once this process is engrained, the prisoners' practice of self policing will render a better behaved, productive prison environment.

Foucault (1977) takes the panopticon a step further, applying it to situations outside of the prison/guard scenarios. Foucault concentrates on issues of power, the primary reasons for the panopticon's success. He argues that the panopticon must "be a generalizable model of function;

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