

**Social Media: A (new) contested terrain between  
sousveillance and surveillance in the digital workplace**

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# **Social Media: a (new) contested terrain between sousveillance and surveillance in the digital workplace**

## **Abstract**

*Online social media activities constitute a (new) contested terrain of NTWE in the new digital workplace. This article explores the extent to which new social media (SM) digital technologies extend managerial control and, alternatively, give employees dissenting capacity to reverse or turn the digital panoptical gaze back on their employer - invoking both a contested terrain and counter discipline of managerial authority. By deploying sousveillance, workers may use SM to observe management, capture material to post online, and voice dissenting employee views. Such employee dissent problematises approaches to corporate surveillance practices and management authority, which attempts to intrusively control employee online activities. The article contributes to extant literature on sousveillance, employee dissent and management control. Methods comprise data gathered from 25 interviews with HR managers, frontline managers, and operational employees in seven organisations, triangulating contested perceptions of managerial surveillance practice and dissenting employee sousveillance.*

**Keywords:** Dissent, HRM, Management control, Social media, Sousveillance, Surveillance.

## **Introduction**

This paper offers a novel contribution focusing on the new contested terrain between competing forms of observation practices in work regarding digital social media technologies; specifically, employee sousveillance and managerial surveillance. It broadens scholarly debate to focus on the prevailing use of these digital technologies in contemporary NTWE contexts

(Hodder, 2020). Social media (SM) technologies have radically reshaped work and altered the traditional boundaries which previously existed between the public and private aspects of working lives (Bucher *et al.*, 2013; Holtgrewe, 2014). Undoubtedly, SM platforms provide corporate management with access to much deeper intimate, personal data (Davison *et al.*, 2011; McDonald and Thompson, 2016; McDonald *et al.*, 2016). Existing literature has captured how SM is integrated in corporations for surveillance purposes and the paradoxical consequences of how employers exploit these devices to extend the range of control, discipline and maximise employee performativity (Kellogg *et al.*, 2020; Spencer, 2017; Thompson and van den Broek, 2010; Thompson *et al.*, 2020; Van Gramberg *et al.*, 2014; van Zoonen and Rice, 2017). Additionally, extant literature illustrates the limited awareness employees have of how their SM data is accessed, monitored or observed beyond the working day, which may diminish their personal privacy (Davison *et al.*, 2011; McDonald and Thompson, 2016; McDonald *et al.*, 2016, Moqbel *et al.*, 2013; Moussa, 2015; Thompson and van den Broek, 2010; Thompson *et al.*, 2020; van den Broek and Dundon, 2012; van den Broek and Thompson, 2017).

Existing conceptualisations sometimes problematically render employees helpless, with apparently little or no agency to resist hegemonic management control (Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992). Focusing solely on top-down managerial surveillance perspectives creates a narrow view and ‘*reduces the range and complexities of management control*’ (Bain and Taylor, 2000:6). Furthermore, such theorisation underplays analysis of worker resistance and dissent (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995; Thompson, 2016). Such assertions fail to acknowledge that SM technologies constitute a new contested terrain (Edwards, 1979) of conflicting interests between top-down managerial control and bottom-up employee sousveillance.

This article seeks to address this gap by giving greater prominence to employee sousveillance as an emergent form of digital worker resistance to managerial surveillance.

Sousveillance is defined as an activity where the observer becomes the observed using digital technologies (Mann *et al.*, 2003). Sousveillance, is, therefore, an inverted form of surveillance or bottom-up observation (Fernback, 2013; Ganascia, 2010). In corporate contexts, employees may both resist managerial control and use digital devices to turn their panoptical gaze upwards to observe those in power. Employee sousveillance problematizes power relations and inverts traditional forms of workplace observation and monitoring associated with surveillance; opening up a wider ‘contested terrain’ (Edwards, 1979; McDonald and Thompson, 2016). Sousveillance in work is worthy of greater study. Little in-depth data exists on how employees observe or turn the digital gaze back on their employer (or each other). Notable exceptions include research by Taylor and colleagues (Bain and Taylor, 2000; Moore and Taylor, 2016; Taylor and Moore, 2019). We build on this literature to examine how employees seek to protect or use online identities to dissent or resist management intrusions by using SM to observe management. Accordingly, the research question we address is: *How do employees use social media technologies to sousveil employers to resist or dissent against management control?*

Our study reveals how workers use SM to observe management, voice concerns, endure, resist or dissent against electronic surveillance and managerial digital control. We seek to deepen understanding of how those in power are increasingly observed in and beyond work, contributing conceptually and empirically to debates about potential for worker dissent in digitized contexts, observed in this journal and elsewhere (Hodder and Houghton, 2020; McDonald *et al.*, 2016; Thompson, 2016). Our research considers how employees counter-mobilise online individually or collectively; challenging unitary assumptions about the employment relationship, circumnavigating HRM approaches and in defiance of corporate control mechanisms. The technologies focused on in this article are social media networks such as Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn etc, and personally owned mobile devices.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews relevant literature on the

theoretical frames of top-down managerial surveillance and the sub-altern perspective of employee sousveillance as an emergent form of bottom-up workplace observation and resistance or dissent. The second section details the qualitative research methods and presents the empirical data collected from 25 in-depth interviews with operational management, HRM practitioners and frontline employees in a mixture of seven large UK private and public sector organisations. The third section presents the findings and discussion; revealing how differing social actors in key operational roles used SM to control, monitor and observe one another within increasingly blurred boundaries between work and private lives. Our findings illustrate emergent forms of employee sousveillance, resistance and dissent, both individually and collectively. Moreover, our findings reveal how SM technologies create a paradigm shift, where employees are more deeply ensnared between these competing veillance agendas. The final section provides conclusions and identifies recommendations for future research.

### **Social media, digital panopticism and competing veillance practices**

We begin by framing SM use and the differing veillance practices in work. Digitally networked technologies are increasingly relied upon at work for communications, including varieties of SM (Cammaerts, 2015). SM are web 2.0 services assimilated into organisational and personal environments, allowing users to communicate, share and exchange ideas (Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Reid and Reid, 2004). SM devices are multifunctional, offering a myriad of opportunities to socialise, trade, market, collate data, recruit, and attract talent to corporate brands (Headworth, 2016; Uldam, 2017). SM have increased the speed of work and diminished the traditional boundaries between employment and personal privacy (Archer-Brown *et al.*, 2018; Jacobson and Tufts, 2013; Lam, 2016; Siegert and Löwstedt, 2019). SM use deeper algorithmic tracking and synoptic observation of differing individual identities or viewpoints (Fernback,

2013). Unquestionably, their *raison d'être* encourages users to observe one another regularly, an important canon in this study.

### ***Managerial surveillance and SM***

Closely monitoring employees' online activities reinforces dominant perspectives of wider control regimes at work, suggesting employees are increasingly observed by corporate management through their use of SM devices. Surveillance is an enduring, normalised feature of managerial work, defined as the supervision, monitoring, collation, and storage of information to establish discipline (Dandeker, 1990; Townley, 1994). Surveillance is derived from the French words '*sur*' meaning over or above, and '*veiller*' to observe or watch (Foucault, 1975:201; Mann and Ferenbok, 2013; Townley, 1994). Foucauldian theory anchors notions of surveilling to the *Panopticon*; a physical architectural structure such as a tower, platform, or mechanism, which by design, generates total visibility of others and a lofty position to observe employees or inmates (Bain and Taylor, 2000; Foucault, 1975; Townley, 1994; Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992). For example, watchtowers are concretely built into corporate entities such as call-centres or factories. The constant advancement of digital technologies provides corporations with increased capacity to incorporate wider mechanisms of surveillance (Briken *et al.*, 2017). Digital networks are vast virtual structures which enable corporations to observe, check or track individuals or groups in and beyond work, signifying the conception of *digital panopticism*. Such ethereal corporeality creates a sinister sense of an all-seeing-eye employer and every-where-ness (Foucault, 1975; Scott, 2015; Thompson, 2003).

Existing literature highlights that digital platforms are used by corporations for recruitment processes, controlling, monitoring, tracking and disciplining employees; often beyond work (Ball, 2010; Bennett *et al.*, 2010; Biro, 2011; Lucero, *et al.*, 2013, Moqbel *et al.*,

2013; Moussa, 2015; Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992; Thompson, 2003; Thompson *et al.*, 2020). HRM involvement in SM practices are increasingly pervasive, underpinning Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS). Digital analytical activity includes personal profiling, screening/cyber-vetting, observing employee posts or blogs to mitigate against online presences which impacts on brand reputation, or to address conflict between colleagues (Ball, 2010; Berkelaar, 2017; CIPD, 2013; Lam, 2016; McDonald *et al.*, 2016; Moussa, 2015; Stone *et al.*, 2015; Thompson *et al.*, 2020, Tripathy and Kaur, 2012). During worktime, employers scrutinise and calculate employee data usage or limit personal use of company computers and mobile devices (Coker, 2011). These surveillance activities are justified by management to limit negligent hiring, regulate employee distractedness, and minimise low productivity attributed to SM use at work (Moqbel *et al.*, 2013; Tripathy and Kaur, 2012). Employers, therefore, have greater capacity to reimagine methods of control, which act as an ‘electronic leash’ to discipline employees (Moussa, 2015; Towns and Cobb, 2012: 205). Thus, SM technologies increase the complexity of power exerted over employees and widens the scope of management practice associated with top-down surveillance.

### ***Employee sousveillance and SM***

However, SM digital devices are multidirectional and existing conceptions often do not account for how employees turn the panoptical gaze on their employers to observe, organise, resist or dissent against management. Therefore, online SM technologies create potential space for workers and their employers to concurrently use SM to observe and monitor one another, simultaneously; thus, establishing the premise for emergent counter-regimes of dissenting sousveillance as part of a new digitally contested terrain.

Sousveillance is derived from the French words ‘*sous*’ meaning under or below and ‘*veiller*’ meaning to watch. Theoretically deploying this to work regimes, management would

become observed by the employees they supposedly dominate, providing an important sub-altern narrative to managerial observation. Employee sousveillance infers that employees have agency to contest management misbehaviours, voice workplace concerns or use SM technologies for the purposes of worker activism (Ganascia, 2010; Hodder and Houghton, 2020; Uldam, 2017 Author 1, 2018). This extends the contested terrains which exist within contemporary employment relationships and critically challenges dominant management orthodoxies of surveillance practices which allegedly render employees powerless (Cammaerts, 2015; Edwards, 1979; Hurrell *et al.*, 2017; McDonald and Thompson, 2016; Author 1). Indeed, original conceptions of sousveillance suggested mobile technologies were used to film, photograph, and record data of those in power; allowing schisms in corporate power dynamics to emerge (Mann *et al.*, 2003). Early theorisation of sousveillance suggests those participating in such activities would voluntarily provide access to their data and were aware such information is recorded. It was hoped sharing personal data freely would lead to a fairer, balanced world-state of justice and aid denunciation of abuse. Early sousveillance activity has recorded injustices regarding consumer issues and racism (Mann *et al.*, 2003, Ganascia, 2010).

Mann *et al.*, (2003) did not specifically refer to SM technology when they theorised sousveillance or networked society. We seek, therefore, to extend this early conceptualisation of sousveillance to include internal and external SM platforms (Yammer, LinkedIn, Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest etc), employee blogs, online avatars, use of emails and personally owned mobile phones. These digitised technologies allow employee communications to be shared across vast, visible, virtual networks. Furthermore, such devices allow employees, in organisational contexts, to post material, individually or collectively, to challenge, resist or dissent against management regimes of digital control more publicly, posing a conundrum for HRM practices. Such posts are perceived to create greater workplace

contestations, which would seemingly clash with corporate desires to maintain harmonious unitarist employment relationships (Jeske and Shultz, 2015; Moussa, 2015; Uldam, 2017). Employee sousveillance, therefore, subtly shifts notions of top-down hegemonic panoptical managerial surveillance towards a more micropolitical view, influencing conflicting concerns in online contexts.

Contextually, it is a pertinent time to review trends in employee sousveillance, resistance or dissent in new digital SM contexts. Sousveillance of the powerful has occurred, for instance, against the backdrop of societal resistance to authority as witnessed in protests such as Black Lives Matter, the storming of Capitol Hill, USA; and more recently in the UK, attempts to legally protest the proposed Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill 2021. Furthermore, in despotic and oppressive work regimes like Amazon, Foxconn and Sports Direct, employees have filmed and shared their dire working conditions through SM (Chan and Pun, 2010; Briken and Taylor, 2018).

### **Employee resistance and dissent**

Foucault stated '*where there is power, there is resistance*' (1978: 95). However, Townley (1994) critiqued Foucauldian conceptualisations of surveillance for inadequately acknowledging scope for resistance. Consideration, therefore, must be given to sousveillance as an emerging form of employee dissent, resistance, or misbehaviour. As illustrated, management control of SM devices or digitised environments in work is not a permanent, all-encompassing iron cage; even using sophisticated electronic and ICT surveillance. Sociology of work literature has highlighted the dynamism and ongoing indeterminacy of labour, illustrating how employees seek ways to resist, evade or subvert managerial control at work (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2003:47; Thompson, 2016). Unitary assumptions of employment relationships view such non-compliance as an outward form of employee dissent, defined as an act of expressing contradictory opinions or disagreement about policy, practice or operations

(Kassing, 1998). Therefore, employee sousveillance reifies ICT surveillance as an arena of political contest or conflict.

Resistance, conflict, and misbehaviours are inextricably linked, manifesting, not simply as a response to exploitation or domination, but occurring when management give little regard to wider social implications of changes in work, both technological or other (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2003). Contextually, employees increasingly use digitised platforms to voice contestations, often anonymously, to challenge employer power and foster new interpretations of workplace behaviour in online contexts (Ravazzani and Mazzei, 2018). Extant literature demonstrates growing potentiality for employee voice, dissent, misbehaviour, and clashing concerns as factors in contested employment relationships (Moore and Taylor, 2016; Thompson *et al.*, 2020; Townsend, 2005; Upchurch and Grassman, 2016). Thompson *et al.*, (2020) drew upon employee survey responses in the UK and Australia to focus on employee online comments about employers during working time. Their analyses demonstrated a sufficient pool of misbehaviours existed, albeit in an emergent and uneven form. Employees exercised the right to voice concerns and develop fluid online private identities. Their findings illustrate conflictual employee views, dissent, and resistance to employer measures to profile or discipline workforces. Other contemporary research identifies potential for collective resistance and trade union activism relating to SM activities. Upchurch and Grassman (2016) observed that SM use allows social movements to mobilise during labour conflicts. Their case study focused on a cabin crew dispute at British Airways (UK), identifying SM use as a growing contested terrain. Moore and Taylor (2016) reveal how SM aided the mobilisation and organisation of trade union members for industrial action during the unfavourable context of the restrictive 2016 Trade Union Bill (see also Taylor and Moore, 2019). Additionally, trade unions are using SM to recruit, campaign, and organise young workers (Geelen, 2015; Hodder and Houghton, 2020). Hodder and Houghton (2020) concluded that SM is passively used by

trade unions in general. However, they suggest SM provides young workers with scope to voice concerns; primarily because they are more immersed in online cultures. They caution SM is *'limited in the extent to which they can offer safe spaces free from employer surveillance and countermobilisation'* (Hodder and Houghton, 2020:55).

These conceptions emphasise that (new) bottom-up forms of employee dissent, misbehaviour and resistance are possible using SM devices to enhance employee voice (Martin *et al.*, 2015) or counter-disciplining those in authority. In doing so, these activities problematise traditional notions of surveillance and employee acquiescence, posing a challenge to unitarist perspectives of the employment relationship and management as the sole legitimate authority (Fox, 1966). Unitarism demands loyalty from employees, viewing conflict as irrational and deviant. Surveillance typically prevails in hegemonic, ultra-unitarist environments. Sousveillance, as an emerging construct, counteracts such notions by capturing evidence that management are not the paragons of appropriate or expected organisational behaviours (Mann *et al.*, 2003; author 1, 2018), and that alternative voices are important.

Whilst sousveillance may both be a participatory and emancipatory activity for workers, it may be categorised by management as an outward act of misbehaviour, breaching the privacy of corporate power, provoking intensified panoptic top-down monitoring (Biro, 2011; Fernback, 2013). This is ethically and morally problematic and could create pathways for wider punitive actions or employer retaliation to exponentially grow. Exploring the dynamics and tensions between these competing forms of veillance is therefore much needed. Currently, limited qualitative research exists about employee sousveillance at work in SM contexts. Additional empiricism about online employee dissent and misbehaviour is therefore required. Our qualitative empirical data examines how employees used SM networks for the purposes of sousveillance, whistleblowing or to record evidence of management

(mis)behaviours and in doing so, whether this narrowed the power asymmetries between the surveiller and surveilled employees (Author1).

### **Research Methods**

To illicit a detailed phenomenological account of the differing individual encounters, thoughts, and behaviours associated with SM control and resistance, an in-depth qualitative research design was used. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) enabled a deeper exploration and understanding of participants' real-lived experiences of digital employment practices associated with sur and sousveillance and to capture individual responses to the SM phenomenon (Clare, 2003; Smith *et al.*, 1999, 2009). Analysis focused on how employees used or resisted SM regulation or controls both individually and/or collectively and how each actor engaged in the observation of or dissented against management.

#### ***Participant sample and case organisations***

Empirical data was collected in seven large public and private organisations in the UK, using a purposive sampling strategy. Twenty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted with actors in three organisational roles: ten human resources practitioners, seven operational managers, and eight frontline employees; two of whom were trade union representatives. There are more accounts from management and HRM respondents as they were responsible for developing and embedding SM regulation and practice. Their accounts demonstrated how SM networks were used for various business purposes, including branding, consumer interest, communities of practice, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and employee voice. The actors provided rich accounts and experience of invoking disciplinary action or using surveillance to control employee resistance or dissent online. Furthermore, their narratives provided experiences of being surveilled. Each participant experience created a deeper multi-perspective

allowing divergent views of SM use, surveillance and sousveillance to be triangulated (Smith, 1999).

Access to participants and their employing organisations was sought through a regional branch of The Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) and professional HR networks. Introductions to participants were initially via HR directors, who held responsibility for developing SM regulation and control. A snowball approach was then used to gain access to management and employee participants. Criteria for participation included: engagement in SM use, experience of performance management or disciplinary issues with SM misuse. Access was granted to interview recognised trade union representatives involved in SM regulation or cases of perceived SM misbehaviour. Not all organisations in the sample recognised trade unions, thus a low union participation was recorded. Access was sought to workers who had been disciplined for SM activities. This ensured a comprehensive exploration of employee misbehaviour, conflict, and dissent. Table 1 provides an overview of the organisations, sectors, participants, and roles. It further illustrates levels of SM adoption, corporate regulations, and variegated control approaches. Participating organisations and actors are anonymised to protect identities.

TABLE 1 HERE

### *Data collection and analysis*

Interviews were scheduled with HR leads and conducted at participating organisation sites. This provided ethnographic opportunities to observe organisational contexts. Interviews lasted between 30 and 120 minutes, occurring during 2015 and 2016. Access to wider textual materials was sought, including relevant SM policies or investigation case notes. Interview questions focused on varietal use of SM platforms to ascertain similarities or variances between personal and organisational preferences. Further questions explored understanding of SM

policy development or regulation to ascertain how rules were applied in each organisation. Additional enquiry focused on employee voice mechanisms to ascertain whether workers were included as stakeholders in SM policy development or controls regulating use. Supplementary questions explored how actors managed the blurring boundaries between work and private lives. Lastly, questions were developed to focus on personal perceptions of online behaviours.

The data analysis process was iterative, using manual coding and thematic analysis, reflecting IPA research traditions (Langridge, 2007). Initial immersion focused on a single case generating broad codes and themes (Smith *et al.*, 1999, 2009). The first single case focused on a HR Manager. This case was striking in terms of HRM practices and provided a detailed approach to regulating SM use. The initial case acted as a comparator for similarities or divergences across the wider sample. This process was repeated for each case transcript, providing multiple contrasting perspectives, and eliciting wider views on surveillance and employee sousveillance. The first management case offered a sharply contrasting view, highlighting hegemonic control of SM use. The first employee case focused on an actor who had been disciplined for SM misuse, illustrating deviant online misbehaviour, allowing an exploration of punitive approaches from a worker perspective, and importantly, capturing emotions and aspects of employee resistance.

### **Findings and discussion**

We now present insights into the differing employer workplace regimes which sought to control or minimise SM use. We then illustrate how employees across all levels in the case organisations resisted or dissented against management control of SM in these contexts, demonstrating challenges to unitary management power in this new contested terrain. Importantly, qualitative narratives provided critical insights into emerging forms of employee sousveillance and dissent. Additionally, these narratives demonstrated SM activity was used to reveal management online misbehaviours, an important canon in this study.

### *Social media control*

Participants were asked how their employers restricted, observed or monitored employee SM use. Table 2 summarises four principal techniques with relevant illustrative quotes. These were: *firewalls*, *SM policy*, *observation* and use of *informants*; mechanisms which are perceived to create catalysts for employee sousveillance, resistance or dissent to emerge.

#### TABLE 2 HERE

*Firewalls* are devices installed on corporate personal computers (PC) limiting employee access to SM platforms. The findings highlight that firewalls are not uniformly applied across organisations, enabling technological hierarchies to appear, further subjugating or subdividing frontline employees into deeper workplace classifications. HR and operational manager actors illustrated how firewalls were perceived to increase worker compliance and productivity. A distinction we found is that SM use in work is reified as a privilege for actors in positions of power. This posed an interesting paradox for increasing digitalisation and contradicting contextual notions of digital inclusivity.

Interestingly, firewalls create the first area of dissent relating to wider literature (Coker, 2011). Four management actors (Beth (Tiro), Charles, Clive (Pala) and Greg (Pharma)) discussed how they or their employees circumnavigated firewalls using their own personal devices, revealing minor expressions of resistance or misbehaviour in corporate hierarchies. Two organisations (Pala, Tiro) took breaching firewalls seriously, conducting employee checks on PCs and company-owned mobile devices. Pala forensically checked expenses, calculating lost time, low productivity, and reviewed data usage charges incurred by employees. Calculable evidence was used in disciplinary procedures, demonstrating intense labour control strategies which scrutinise employee SM activity or performativity. Conversely, management actors

stated they were rarely disciplined for breaching firewall or SM protocols, highlighting wider contestations and work inequalities.

*Social Media Policies* are commonplace and were applied in six organisations outlining regulations for SM use and to defend organisational reputation. The HR actors stated SM policy development was complex due to the duality of public/private use. Furthermore, all actors in the study perceived SM policies were variously difficult to locate, and ambiguous. Such findings confirm research on ambiguities in controlling SM use or managing boundaries between work and privacy (Clark and Roberts, 2010; Cooper and Inglehearn, 2015; McDonald and Thompson, 2016). Despite legal advice, one organisation (Aedis) did not have an SM policy:

*... if there were issues around what employees put on Facebook then we would probably cover that under other policies (Aedis, Alex, HR Manager).*

SM policy is important for balancing employers' need to regulate SM use with employee rights (Biro, 2011). Case law and literature suggest employers should create clear rules and unambiguous privacy boundaries (Moussa, 2015). A noticeable lack of SM policy is problematic, enabling employees to resist regulation and contest disciplinary action. Furthermore, an absence of policy is reliant on self-regulation and discretion (Fang *et al.*, 2015).

Only three organisational policies (Alumno, Pharma, Tiro) captured management's right to observe or monitor employee SM use. No policies captured an employee's right to observe management, demonstrating unitary assumptions, whereby observation is reserved for those in power. Furthermore, these policies stipulated that employees posting provocative materials about employers or colleagues would be deemed as '*potential breaches in*

*confidentiality*' (Alumno policy) and subject to discipline. Notions of discipline contained within SM policies revealed trade union concerns about penalties:

*... the point about policy generally, when I'm taking a union perspective ... and looking at what HR are doing, is to say, 'this is about having some way of penalising people if they do something wrong'. I'm very happy to have a policy which is a supportive policy, which says "We'll help and encourage you to do the right things". It's what are the sanctions are if they don't? (Alumno, David, Academic TU representative).*

This narrative demonstrates perceived injustices regarding management capacity to develop penalties for SM use, particularly where policy or punitive action is vague. Literature highlights management capacity to reinvent electronic leashes (Moussa, 2015; Towns and Cobb, 2012: 205) and ongoing need to provide safe spaces for workers; particularly those involved in trade union activism, who may air contradictory opinions or identities online (Hodder and Houghton, 2020).

*Observation.* Management narratives focused heavily on managing employee performance and incorporation of various surveillance techniques. These aligned to the panoptical observation of employees in literature (Foucault, 1975; Moussa, 2015; Moqbel *et al.*, 2013; Townley, 1994). Actors who held managerial roles discussed how they observed co-workers online in more veiled ways:

*I find I am a lurker (Davina, HR Manager, Alumno).*

These management narratives suggested employees are unaware how their SM use is being observed. This linked to more sinister notions of surveillance or employer every-where-ness (Foucault, 1975; Scott, 2015; Thompson, 2003).

Two managers, Beth (Tiro) and Frances (Charta), used physical proximity to observe, standing directly over employees to humiliate or coerce them into productivity. This illustrated deep managerial mistrust of employees, reflecting coercive unitarist environments. These

examples were perceived to be symptomatic of wider organisational cultures which focus heavily on maximising revenue performance (Tiro, Charta). Frances (Charta) consistently used metaphors to describe a keen-eyed observation of her team ensuring they avoided malingering at work. Interestingly, Frances, developed a bastardised rule, creating a mobile phone amnesty; physically removing personal mobile devices and making employees place their phones on a window ledge before commencing work routines (Coker, 2011). This was not an organisational protocol but a personally designed management tactic to limit SM access. This was perceived to subjugate and infantilise employees. Furthermore, such coercive work regimes create impetus for employees to turn the gaze on management using sousveillance as a mechanism of retaliation or dissent.

*Informants.* A discretionary management approach further demonstrated a symbiotic relationship between schemas of surveillance and sousveillance. Employee informants were used in on and offline contexts, extending the range of visibility and managerial power across physical and digital networks. Using informants is perceived to undermine morale, creating suspicion and fear between peer groups. Significantly, this theme captured how management and peers alike capitalise on the synoptic observation of each other (Fernbeck, 2013). This acts as a catalyst for wider employee sousveillance, significantly also encompassing co-workers. One HR actor regularly observed her peers online using their content to admonish colleagues:

*Do you know who your friends are?* (Alumno, Debbie, HR Advisor)

This narrative signified a deeper ethical issue relating to knowledge of (un)truths, illustrating how new methods of online observation ensnares employees between competing veillance practices. This revealed the increasing extent to which employees are further subjugated or observed by peers in their SM use, particularly those in lower operational roles. More broadly, this exposed wider management tactics, which appear benign, but are deployed

to manipulate modes of observation, ferment competition and a greater jockeying for positions of favouritism within organisational sub-structures or in-groups.

### *Emerging forms of sousveillance*

This section examines differing forms of employee sousveillance to counteract management activity or watch each other. The narratives revealed how employees systematically use SM to collectively mobilise resistance and observe management. This often occurred in closed, informal online groups. Closed groups or internal platforms were perceived to offer employees safer spaces to speak freely amongst each other. Employees used these collectively to voice concerns or discuss issues together; counter-reacting to management control and allowing solidarity to grow.

### *Informal solidarity*

This example illustrates how employees were found to informally mobilise using internal digital platforms for employee voice, action or participatory means:

*... [employees] setting up weird groups like the carpark appreciation society...quite funny stuff. So, it was kind of by people's choice that they started using it (Senes, Elizabeth, CSR Manager).*

Employee voice (EV) is an enduring employment relations concept encompassing a range of actions which allow employee involvement and participation in workplace decision-making (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2020). In unitary workplace contexts this is reliant on the support of management to create EV mechanisms. In one case narrative (*Senes*), employees used Yammer to voice concerns, successfully ensuring management resolved a contentious health, safety and carparking issue. However, EV activity, may have repercussions if comments online are misinterpreted by management, particularly, if comments were made by trade union activists. Additionally, informal organising is perceived to impact on trade union participation if desired actions are achieved (Hodder and Houghton, 2020).

### *Subversive solidarity and defriending*

One effective method of resisting management was to defriend management from online groups. Creating a subversive closed online group effectively exiles management from any dialogue, momentarily halting any capability to control or discipline workers. One specific case focused on the summary dismissal of a colleague. This caused employee mistrust and resentment towards management. The director recanted how the closed group formed and used emotive language regarding the disciplinary action:

*Oh, there's a snake in the grass, we all need to stick together now, you can't trust anybody.*  
(Tiro, Beth, Sales Director).

Online resistance in this case drew attention to how employee interrelations overlap with disciplinary processes which leaders must discursively navigate. The management actor discussed how the terminated employee had made derogatory comments about her online. These were shown to her by an employee, impacting greatly on her self-identity:

*... it was clear he was slagging me off ... horrible, vindictive, nasty, manipulative, and unprofessional behaviour... we went through a quandary of how we dealt with it. In that instance, because of who his network was we decided not to do anything...* (Tiro, Beth, Sales Director).

This illustrated the ramifications of subversive solidarity for management who are targeted via closed groups. Being 'unfollowed' or defriended has not been written about much. This demonstrated how management are subject to fickle 'friendships' in digital contexts, creating a fragility in online employment relations and effectively reducing management power. Derogatory comments about management in online forums is inculcated in case law, often resulting in disciplinary action (Biro, 2011). This conceptually relates to misbehaviour in groups (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2003; van den Broek and Dundon, 2012). Importantly, this case highlighted trust in contemporary employment relationships is fleeting. One person in the closed group showed management the posts, further illustrating likelihood of peer-to-peer sousveillance.

Individuals in this case (Tiro) were not disciplined over their actions, for financial reasons. Management felt there would be a perceived loss of net economic worth if the employer held the group to account. Thus, identity, social capital and economic power gave these employees space to resist management successfully, narrowing the power asymmetry in this specific employment relations context. In other contexts, such dissent might cause management to forcefully retaliate and seek to regain tight control (Thompson, 2016).

### *Peer sousveillance*

A dominant theme emerged regarding how co-workers observed each other, creating greater symbiosis between surveillance and sousveillance. This increased the perception that employees are ensnared between these veillance practices in organisations. Examples where employee peer sousveillance of each other occurred included issues such as timekeeping, absence, location, and perceptions of low productivity. We observed how management quickly capitalised on peer-to-peer observation of SM activities, adding greater complexity in contemporary employment relationships:

*People were emailing me back going oh Darcy you are on Facebook during work time*  
(Alumno, Darcy, Support Officer)

This narrative illustrates how SM posts are observed during working time. Co-workers may use SM to observe and judge peers, particularly where a perceived conflict in routines or productivity occurs. Employees sousveill and track each others' whereabouts and forms of misbehaviour as evidence to address perceptions of injustice in work (Mann *et al.*, 2003; Ganascia, 2010). Four employee misbehaviours were identified through peer sousveillance as follows: absenteeism, breaches in confidentiality, stealing, and downloading SM contacts.

*Absenteeism.* All actors discussed perceptions of mistrust and suspicion when observing co-workers who were perceived to feign illness and who posted contradictory SM content:

*...I looked at her sickness record and I got this really weird feeling to have a look on Facebook, ...this picture of her ... 'getting pissed with [friend]' ... during work, when she was supposedly sick. (Alumno, Darcy, Support Officer)*

This narrative illustrated how co-workers are often caught out by their interconnectivity. Peers use observation to capture SM evidence and rebalance perceived injustices in work treatment. Employment Tribunal cases cite Facebook activity as evidence of fitness to work. However, employers using SM materials to discipline employees could lead to discrimination or unfair dismissal claims (Biro, 2011). A trade union representative participant suggested such actions required discretion:

*...People should be entitled to privacy... if you go home and say have you seen this it can escalate a lot more and be blown out of proportion (Gary, Pharma, Trade Union Rep).*

It was apparent these sensitivities are rife in contemporary working environments. Peer to peer observation, therefore, requires greater reflection by HR practitioners to enable a deeper understanding of individual personal circumstances and manage suspicions aroused by sousveillance which may cause wider contestations in work.

*Breaching Confidentiality* was identified as a strong reason to observe peers. One actor, (Brittany) explained how they were disciplined for posting confidential photos of a recruitment applicant on Facebook. The posts were escalated to management by her HR peers:

*I was made an example of ... totally screwed over... to have one of your own get you... when you befriend people, you don't expect them to use it against you. (Tiro, Brittany, Salesperson).*

This narrative shows the emotional shock at being sousveilled and betrayed by peers. Thus, employees need greater understanding regarding how interconnectivity may manifest in fickle 'friendships' online. Significantly, this actor was unclear about recruitment, SM, and data protection regulations, showing little reflection or remorse for her actions. Moreover, they were unclear that their behaviour constituted misconduct. They resigned prior to the disciplinary dismissal meeting. This relates to wider literature, which emphasises greater need

for organisations to develop SM training and regulations for online behaviours to protect both employee and employer reputations (Biro, 2011; Broughton *et al.*, 2010; McDonald *et al.*, 2016; Moussa, 2015).

*Pilfering and selling stolen goods.* Appropriation of goods from work has been historically written about as a form of criminal misbehaviour and exchange networks which may occur inside or outside workplaces (Mars, 1982). In this case illustration Facebook was used to offload stolen goods and observed by peers:

*He shared them on his Facebook selling them...it was not us that found out. It was another employee had found out cos they were friends... (Senes, Elizabeth, CSR Manager).*

SM extends the range for self-opportunism and wider deviant behaviours to emerge. Significantly, this increases the extent to which colleagues will sousveill one another to capture perceived wrongdoings. Weitz *et al* (2012) state that employment provides opportunities to advantageously use organisation resources. Using SM contacts for entrepreneurial self-gain is a growing area of employment law.

*Downloading SM contacts.* This narrative highlighted how LinkedIn contacts were used to secure a new job whilst still employed. In this instance a client informed the employer:

*... he sent that to everybody on LinkedIn... emailed that list [contacts] from work to his home address ... rang in sick the next day...emailed 700 people, my contacts, my 12 years of building up that database, ... suggesting that he could do a better job if he worked internally for that company. (Tiro, Beth, Sales Director)*

Using SM contacts for personal gain is a breach of confidential information and implied duty of good faith in an employment contract. Corporations seek to protect assets like client contacts and databases using restrictive covenants which serve to legally protect the employer. The individual in this case was summarily dismissed.

*Leader Sousveillance*

Those in positions of power were widely followed and sousveilled via their digital, online use. The following case illustrates how observation intensifies, particularly when individuals experiment with subversive portrayals of self on SM:

*I have another [online] account that is a parody account...only somebody didn't see it as a parody here* (Senes, Erica, HR Director).

This case narrative gave a fascinating insight into emerging managerial online misbehaviours, which are rarely captured (McDonald and Thompson, 2016; van den Broek and Dundon, 2012). The case particularity was interesting as the actor was an HR director who developed specific, clear organisational rules regarding SM use at work. Simultaneously, this actor was experimenting with a provocative parody HR account critiquing HR. This illustrates how digital platforms allow individuals to create ulterior, liminal identities (Kerrigan and Hart, 2016). This case illuminated a rebellious dis-location of self, signifying digitalisation affords wider opportunities to create anti-identity constructs (Carroll and Levy, 2008). Such contradictory worker identities are perceived to create mistrust of those we are supposed to respect (Author1). Employees are expected to commit to professional conventions online as stipulated in SM policies (Broughton *et al.*, 2010), which made this case surprising. Despite being knowledgeable about such regulations, this actor believed their ulterior account would remain anonymised or securely contained within bounded contexts (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). However, as literature suggests, SM activity is prone to leakage (Kerrigan and Hart, 2016). Employee sousveillance unearthed their contradictory behavioural identities and was used to achieve justice from an employee perspective. Nonetheless, the management actor was only subjected to mild reprimand.

## **Conclusions**

Online social media activities constitute a (new) contested terrain (Edwards, 1979) of NTWE in the new digital workplace. This paper provides a novel contribution regarding the

tensions and paradoxes of this new digital contested terrain of SM activities, particularly how bottom-up employee sousveillance contests top-down managerial surveillance.

Employee sousveillance in work is a previously under-explored topic. Our empirical evidence has revealed how organisational actors are simultaneously surveilled and sousveilled, illustrating a growing complexity in different forms of observation and monitoring practice at work associated with online SM technologies. Indeed, a key contribution for deeper understanding of SM HRM practice was identification of (un)ethical and immoral managerial surveillance practices or employee sousveillance techniques. Such activities are fraught with capacity for increased conflict (Bain and Taylor, 2000; McDonald *et al.*, 2016; Moussa, 2015).

Empirically, we illustrate how SM gives employees capacity to voice workplace concerns, resist or report exploitative, abusive management practice through individual and/or collective voice channels where employees can air their concerns (McDonald *et al.*, 2016; Thompson, 2016; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2020; Hodder and Houghton, 2020). Such employee SM activity is perceived to sow additional seeds of mistrust between management and workers, leading to wider resistance, dissent, and for forms of misbehaviour to materialise.

To some extent, our qualitative data indicates how employee surveillance is about holding those in authority to account, particularly leaders who abuse power or who experiment with liminal identities that are significantly more prone to SM leakage (Hurrell *et al.*, 2017; Kerrigan and Hart, 2016; McDonald and Thompson, 2016; Richards and Kosmala, 2013; Thompson *et al.*, 2020; Upchurch and Grassman, 2016). Increasingly intrusive forms of observation of SM activities further blur boundaries between work and private lives (McDonald and Thompson, 2016); including senior managers creating rebellious, ulterior identities (Carroll and Levy, 2008). Additionally, we reveal, in such instances, organisations were unclear how to apply penalties or sanctions for leaders who misuse SM. We therefore

build on pre-existing literature regarding SM control, observation, profiling or monitoring, which lack embeddedness or clarity (Biro, 2011; Broughton et al., 2010; McDonald and Thompson, 2016). Indeed, many HR actors in our study implied that SM policies were either non-existent (Aedis) or difficult to identify. Additionally, there appears to be a lack of explicit regulations or guidance on employee sousveillance, which may be perceived or categorised more broadly as intrusive practice. This could potentially foment ongoing collectivised resistance from trade unions and create a spiral of wider mistrust or further retaliatory employee and employer (mis)behaviours (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2003; Hodder and Houghton, 2020; McDonald et al., 2016).

Our research revealed a significant but not unexpected discovery. Disciplinary treatment was often unequal, unfair, and arbitrary, and highly dependent on rank/seniority. Management seemingly have preferential treatment if they post inflammatory materials or breached firewalls. Conversely, frontline employees were reprimanded, subjected to rigid checks, and summarily dismissed. Clearly, people in lower operational roles are more mistrusted and significantly at risk from such ambiguities. Our findings add to awareness of power imbalance and inequalities of workplace fairness and justice between management and those they manage in workplaces governed along highly unitarist lines (Dundon et al., 2020).

Additionally, we reveal how employees may successfully subvert managerial disciplinary powers. We demonstrably show that employees may successfully mobilise, collectively using closed groups to effectively deconstruct disciplinary action, by de-friending management. Closed groups allow employees to create a safe space which seemingly narrows the power asymmetries in work. In our case illustration, management did not retaliate or apply sanctions against such contestations or antagonisms due to the social group's net economic worth and the importance of their wider networks. This finding illuminates much deeper implications for employment relations climates and the potential for SM activities to create

increasingly gladiatorial working conditions and provoke challenges to managerial authority and legitimacy.

Significantly, we illustrate how management may retaliate by exploiting informal employee networks, using favoured employees as informants to extend disciplinary reach. These emerging largely informal digitised regimes are not explicitly governed by formal organisation policy guidelines for SM activities, raising wider ethical implications regarding (un)truths and implications for HRM policies and practices.

Empirically, we illustrate how such ultra-unitarist management and HR workplace regulation of employee SM activities is coupled with increasingly authoritarian and intrusive management practices associated with mistrust and a perceived need to increase control and wider forms of surveillance. This included traditional direct coercive behaviours such as humiliation or physically standing over employees. Moreover, we demonstrate how individual managers develop informal, bastardised rules which suit their own agendas and management styles. This involved removing personal mobile devices and prevalence of veiled online surveillance practices including lurking online to observe employees. Such activities are perceived to encourage covert systems of manipulation, whereby sur/sousveillance practices are inconsistent, subjective, unfair, and reified (Islam, 2012; Author 1).

This paper, therefore, contributes to knowledge by illustrating how employee sousveillance of SM activities provides greater capacity for co-workers to observe one another. Our research reveals how employees at all levels are more deeply ensnared between competing surveillance practices and how management may opportunistically capitalise on employee peer sousveillance as part of its armoury, intensifying workforce control. Employee sousveillance has not previously been considered as an area of HR focus or practice (Mann *et al.*, 2003; Author1, 2018). Critical evaluation and reflection of sousveillance and its relationship with

surveillance in this context contributes to wider understanding of both ulterior management behaviours and ongoing subjugation of employees. Employee sousveillance is not a panacea for worker injustices, only momentarily countering hegemonic employer control; especially where power imbalances are acute. However, employee sousveillance provides some capacity to create collective alliances or solidarities which may address hegemonic work practices in part; therefore, warranting greater study.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Regarding research limitations, the similarity across the sample in this study offers some transferability. However, we recognise that this provides limited scope for empirical generalisability. Future research on this topic would enhance a deeper, critical understanding of the sousveillance phenomena in different SM empirical contexts. Additional qualitative, mixed-methods, longitudinal and comparative studies which focus on employee sousveillance, online misbehaviours and dissent could provide greater in-depth understanding of alternative veillance approaches; as would research tracking management reactions to forms of workplace sousveillance (for example, do management seek to double-down and further intensify SM control or seek to develop more cooperative solutions by facilitating collective employee voice?). It is to be hoped such research will be conducted using critical pluralist and radical frames of reference to enhance contextual understanding of the implications of new digital SM technologies for NTWE and different actors (Author 2 Ref).

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