The Trade-off between Information and Surveillance in a Globalized Working Environment

Tina Foertschbeck, Sociology

Nowadays, the working environment is characterized by efficiency, productivity, increases in turnover, cost reduction, etc. Furthermore, based on my own working experiences, globalization processes, information and networks as well as surveillance do not only play an important role in a modern working environment; they are decisive factors that affect corporate decisions and employers as well as the working life of employees. Therefore, this critical reflection discuss the trade-off between information and surveillance in a globalized working environment, especially from the perspective of employees. My personal working experience at an automotive supplier exemplifies and characterizes a globalized working place, huge and fast flows of information as well as being surveilled by monitors and people.

During my six month internship at an international automotive supplier with its headquarter in a small town in the North of Bavaria, Germany, I recognised how a globalized working environment is linked to an information society (Webster, 2006) as well as to a surveillance society (Lyon, 1994). With eight locations in North America, three in South America, fourteen in Asia and 32 locations in Africa and Europe (Brose 2015b), there is an ‘intensification of world-wide social relations’ (Giddens, 1990: 64) and a ‘stretching, intensification and speeding up of worldwide patterns of interconnectedness’ (Held, 2004: 160). Thus, it is not only the international locations that characterize the globalized working environment; it is also the fact that you are linked (by joint ventures) to (local, national and international) automotive suppliers and car companies in these specific countries, too. However, globalization is more: Producing goods, like automotive parts, all over the world is one part of globalization; the other part is trading and selling these products and services everywhere, too.
Furthermore, according to Ritzer (2004), the phenomenon of McDonaldization can be observed in a modern working environment, too. My internship company presents and introduces the company-specific working environment on its homepage as follows, ‘Employees at all locations work in an almost identical environment in line with the same organizational models, subsequently saving costs in administration and development as well as increasing efficiency and motivation of the employees’ (Brose 2015a). According to this statement, all of the four principles Ritzer (2004) identifies for fast food restaurant in modern societies, can be transferred to this mentioned automotive supplier. The first principle, predictability, can be seen at the external appearance of the company: Wherever you are, every location has the same standardized type of building and there is one unique corporate identity all over the world. The second principle, efficiency, which is directly quoted in the statement, is achieved by desk-sharing. This efficient organisational form includes less physical working places than employees within one location, so employees can choose their desk on a daily basis. The background for this is the assumption that some employees will be ill and cannot come to work, and that other working hour models (home office, part-time work, sales representatives, etc.) do not require physical attendance by the employees. This organizational form can only be implemented by working paperless and a quick flow of information to which I will return later. Another principle of Ritzer’s (2004) theory is calculability. I need not point out, I suppose, that quantitative aspects of sold products play an important role in a globalized working environment, too. The fourth principle, control, is extensively discussed later.

Another feature of a globalized working environment is the ‘increasing crossborder flows of goods, services, money, people [and] information’ (Guillén, 2001: 236). Getting the latest information by mobile phones and emails, Skype appointments with people from all over the world as well as computer networks and shared computer files are examples for a large and quick exchange of information. The ‘development of networks enabled by computer communications technologies’ (Webster, 2014: 109) leads to Castells’ term of ‘informational capitalism’ (Castells, 2004: 18) which includes on the one hand continuity in society (profit making, private property), and on the other hand introduces revolution and change of new networks empowered by ICTs (Webster, 2014). While revolution and change are expressed in the key group of scientists and engineers (Bell, 1973), which predict and plan further strategies, encourage people to develop their knowledge, character and their skills (Webster, 2014) and develop new automotive technologies, efficiency, productivity, increases in turnover and cost reduction are signifier for the continuity because they are always taken into account by the management, too.

Informational capitalism enables global flexibility because of far-reaching international networks (Webster, 2006). These networks link locations and their employees, facilitate company decisions and allow workers to work together, to share different theoretical knowledge and to get the latest news. By using mutual computer networks and shared
computer files as well as ICTs, such as emails and mobile phones, the employees can work together in a productive, efficient and time- and cost-saving environment, which encourage corporate goals. Nevertheless, the rapid flow of information is not the only characteristic of the so-called information society (Webster, 2006); the access to information is huge: the world wide web, emails, as well as shared computer files allow a quick and simple access to all needed information (ibid., 2006). These technological and spatial characteristics of an information society changed society in a quantitatively and qualitatively way Webster (2006).

However, not all that glitters is gold. International project groups, which work together by sharing computer files and networks, are surveilled, too. It is not only the employees’ body that is monitored by barriers to entry, their performances, knowledge and identity are recorded, too. Lyon’s term ‘transparent worker’ (Lyon, 1994: 129) refers to the possibility that due to computer systems, you can be watched by managers, workmates and yourself (Lyon 1994; 2007). Because of sharing computer files and computer networks, you precisely know who has changed information within the computer files and to what time. Your supervisor and your workmates can understand your work done, but you can also reproduce their work. It becomes apparent that all the information flows due to ICTs do not only provide content-related information; they provide information about your performance, your work process and your identity, too.

Therefore, Blanchette and Johnson (2002) refer to a panoptic society because of all the ICTs, which collect information about our everyday (work) lives. The management of the automotive supplier, where I did my internship, was confident that open-plan offices as well as all-glass meeting rooms and all-glass offices for the management lead to higher efficiency and productivity, too. The ‘state of conscious and permanent visibility’ (Foucault, 2007: 70) due to glass and open-plan offices as well as ICTs automatically leads to power. According to Foucault (2007), the power exert by the management is visible and unverifiable. On the one hand, it is visible because the presented office design allows the management to observe your performance by using ICTs as well as by physical presence; you do not have any protection. On the other hand, power is unverifiable because you are not aware of being observed or not. You do not know if your email account or mobile is currently tracked and traced or if your boss monitors your computer files. You do not have any protection and you can resist these top-down guidelines.

However, our modern working society is not only characterized by a panoptic society; it is also defined by a synoptic society, too, so that different opticons co-exist (Mathiesen, 1997). Due to glass and open-plan offices, you are not only observed by the management; you can also be observed by your workmates as well as yourself. Thus, according to Mathiesen, we are living in a ‘viewer society’ (1997: 219); we can be observed by everyone, but we also can observe everyone. While a workmate or your supervisor can monitor your computer files and even your emails, you can observe their performances, too by using ICTs, e.g. checking email accounts and computer networks.
It is quite evident that supervisors as well as the management can then be surveilled by their employees, too. Due to my working experience, there is not only a top-down and co-surveillance (surveillance between workmates) that exists and is captured by the mentioned theorists; supervisors can be monitored, too due to open-glass offices for example. Foucault's (1995) disciplinary society is consequently transferable to the employees as well as to the management. Adapt themselves to social norms that exist within society or within the company apply for all hierarchy levels; due to the raise of ICTs, there is a shift in surveillance: nowadays, everyone is watched and watch according to Mathiesen's 'viewer society' (1997: 219).

Overall, the conflict of objectives between information and surveillance in a globalized working environment is extendedly caused by the use of ICTs. Global networking due to locations all over the world by using shared computer files and networks as well as mobile phones and emails, cause a conflict of objectives or a trade-off. The large extent of information flows, on the one hand, enable fast exchange of information from one location to another and allow a quick access to any information needed. On the other hand, these information flows as well as providers and users of information and communication can be surveilled and monitored by the management, by workmates and by ourselves. Thus, by using ICTs, we leave an electronic footprint and 'a trace of our doings' (Lyon, 1994: 4) in a globalized world. In future, we do not only have access to content-related information, but also to personal information relating to workers.
**Bibliography**


