



## Amazon Flexed: Delivering Smiles (and Exploitation)

Mairead Ashford

Amazon's exterior portrays the image of a quintessential company in contemporary society that emerging businesses should aspire to be like. Bringing in \$232.9 billion in revenue last year (Fiegerman, 2019) and having a total of 647,500 employees, it is clear that Amazon is a domineering force in the retail market. This critical reflection explores Amazon's business practices using Fordist and Post-Fordist theory and aims to analyse how this ever-growing company reflects key sociological changes within society and is thus a standout model of informational capitalism. However, while Amazon are a company that have capitalised on the use of information in this era portraying themselves as a model of contemporary success, this critical reflection explores their use of information for surveillance, the exploitation of their workers and their dominance of consumerism for profit, all of which highlights that under closer inspection, Amazon is a company that generates huge profits through the hyper-exploitation of its workforce.

In January 2018, Amazon were granted a patent for a wristband described as an inventory management system that can provide the pinpoint location for

employees within warehouses and track their hand movements (Ong, 2018). Furthermore, Amazon have been accused of timing toilet breaks, setting impossible targets and providing intolerable working conditions (Selby, 2017). It can be argued that Amazon's use of tracking warehouse employees for inventory management is not the wristband's sole purpose - it is also used as an authoritative resource for supervision and performance monitoring. Lyon (2010) suggests surveillance is a central theme of modernity: 'surveillance cuts across all aspects of modernity, as it has been necessary for the functioning of capitalistic enterprises' (Manokha, 2018: 226-227). The form of surveillance used by Amazon relates to the ideas of Foucault and his theory of modern surveillance in



the sense that Amazon's use of information and surveillance technologies produces a panoptic setting that encourages their employees to exercise self-discipline as a normalised

behaviour in the workplace (Manokha, 2018). The illusion that they are being constantly monitored and the uncertainty and fear of unemployment is enough to make this method of employee management work (Lyon, 2010).

A problem within the process of modernization is the need to force people that are used to having meaning within their work, by setting goals and having control over it, to now carry out their work through the implementation of smaller tasks, set by others, that mean their work now became meaningless (Bauman, 2005). Amazon warehouses are equipped with robots that bring the shelf to the worker to be stocked, as opposed to the worker taking the item to the shelf (Kessler, n.d.) and this streamlined approach to production in Amazon warehouse is a Fordist method that rationalises the labour process for the purpose of greater efficiency and productivity, to maximise profit. Additionally, the increased division of labour within the labour processes in Amazon warehouses is a form of scientific management, typically associated with the ideas of F.W. Taylor. Taylor was concerned specifically with the division of labour to the extent that tasks were fragmented into the smallest portions, which would be timed and measured (Grint & Nixon, 2015). Furthermore, jobs would be deskilled to facilitate the employment of cheaper labour and make employment of employees less restrictive, as they would now not need to be employed on the basis of their knowledge (Grint & Nixon, 2015). Taylorism being used in the case of Amazon specifically refers to the standardisation of tasks, which reduces the time it takes for workers to pick items and pack them. However, Kumar argues Fordism and Taylorism as a mode of



development are generally not good for productivity as their 'intensifications of the labour process bring diminishing returns, partly through increased worker alienation and resistance' (2005: 80). Furthermore, Ford found at his own cost, that the division of labour created alienating conditions and took heavy toll of employee moral (Grint & Nixon, 2015). Through the use of rationalisation and standardisation, it is evident that Amazon are exploiting their workers through an enhanced form of control by alienating them and giving their employees intrinsically meaningless work, so they have less to think about.

For Amazon the post-Fordist mode of production means continued forms of old exploitation and new inequality for Amazon employees in the form of contracts. Post-Fordist theory suggests that, 'flexibility is a critical component of the new models of working technology' (Grint & Nixon, 2015: 260). This model suggests organisations should adjust their labour supply to product demand

and for Amazon this comes in the form of employee contracts. Amazon Flex employ contracted delivery drivers and advertise this position to be flexible and for the employee to be in control of their working hours (Amazon Flex, n.d.). Post-Fordist theory suggests risk is increasingly passed onto workers and there are less employment rights as a result of a reduction of support for their labour. This is evident through Amazon Flex, as delivery drivers are restricted to using their own four-door cars and vans only, which they must insure and fuel themselves and because these drivers are classed as self-employed, employees are not entitled to

sick or holiday pay. Furthermore, Taylorism is still evident here, as tasks are repetitive and require minimal skill and this particular job is associated with information technology in the form of an app, which gathers the information for a task and instructs the delivery driver where to make their deliveries. Amazon Flex highlights how the company is using post-Fordist methods of production to avoid problems that Fordist methods may create and they now adhere to a degree of specialisation, however Amazon Flex also indicates that Amazon are using neo-Fordist methods, as the company are requiring their employees to become flexible, as opposed to their employees being in a less hierarchal and alienating environment (Grint & Nixon, 2015).

Post-industrial society saw a shift from the production of goods, to the generation and use of knowledge as the key method for economic growth. Knowledge and information come hand in hand and are thus increasingly important for innovation and growth (Grint & Nixon, 2015). Castells states that organisations 'organise their production system around the maximising of knowledge-based productivity through the development and diffusion of information technologies' (2010: 219). Furthermore, in a post-industrial society knowledge and information have become key sources of productive activity, which is constantly injected back into the productive system that generates innovation, efficiency and productivity: 'the process of feeding knowledge and information back into the productive system is facilitated and enabled by extraordinary advances in information and communication technologies, which allows



organisations much greater control and coordination of their productive activities' (Grint & Nixon, 2015: 276). For Amazon this is achieved through the use of customer information, which is another form of surveillance technology that the company uses in order to maximise profit. Algorithmic methods are used to monitor what consumers buy in order for Amazon to present their customer with items that they think their customers will want to buy. In order to increase consumption, consumers must never be given an opportunity to rest and instead be constantly exposed to new temptations and be seduced into a state of always wanting to buy new things (Bauman, 2005). This highlights how Amazon use the information and knowledge economy to their advantage to exploit their consumers, by using information that they have gathered on what their customers are buying in order to encourage them to buy more items of a similar nature.

The generalization of the internet, in terms of fast communication networks, meant that large and small companies could now easily relate with other and their clients in a flexible and interactive manner (Castells, 2010). Castells suggests that for an organisation to be successful and fit within the characteristics of the information economy, they must be 'able to generate knowledge and process information efficiently; to adapt to the variable geometry of the global economy; to be flexible enough to change their means as rapidly and goals change, under the impact of fast cultural, technological, and

institutional change' (2010: 188). Amazon fit the model that Castells describes as they are platform that have developed a network for smaller companies to sell products through, which indicates why they have become such a successful company in a post-industrial society. However, despite Amazon's huge economic success, Sweney (2018) reports that in 2017, their UK corporation tax bill halved to £4.5m despite earning a record profit of £1.9bn that quarter. In the same week that this information was revealed, Amazon also announced they had just secured £600m to make their first move into the public sector, selling everything from office and school supplies to selling medical equipment to emergency services across 13 local areas (Sweney, 2018). They received major criticism from the GMB Union, who suggested they could do more for public services by simply paying more tax (Sweney, 2018).

In conclusion, this piece of work has explored the business practices deployed by Amazon and has shown how they have adapted their mode of production and development through periods of societal change. While they are clearly successful model of informational capitalism as proposed by Castells (2010), through further exploration it is clear that their success has also come about as a result of the hyper-exploitation of their employees through the use of Information technologies alongside a worrying lack of corporate social responsibility. One might ask how Amazon managed to get away with this? Harvey (2005) suggests that we, as a society, have been socialised into believing that we are better off living under a neoliberal regime of freedoms, which in our current information society appears as little more than a convenient means of increasing corporate monopoly power.

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