



Opinion. Working for Them.

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Abstract

This piece argues that the meteoric rise of the service economy in the West has led to the spread of surveillance practice, not just over individuals who produce goods, but also those who consume them. Since the West's primary form of production is no longer carried out by workers in a factory setting, new kinds of 'workers' are under the watch of surveillance technologies.

In this piece I argue that the meteoric rise of the service economy in the West has led to the spread of surveillance practice, not just over individuals who produce goods, but also those who consume them. I argue that since the West's primary form of production is no longer carried out by workers in a factory setting, new kinds of 'workers' are under the watch of surveillance technologies. But what are these new 'workers' doing? Further, I argue that whilst much has changed since Charlie Chaplin made the movie "Modern Times" and was traumatized by his repetitive work on the factory production line, the principles which laid down this rationalized system of production still affect how the workplace and the workers of today are being watched. Long live Taylorism.

It's not just managers and bosses who threaten an employee if their productivity is not high enough. Since mass production has been replaced by specialized, brand name products, which perhaps do not differ in any significant way from the products of their competitors, except for the emotionally charged illusions developed around the brand name, someone is needed to make this illusion real: the seducers, advertisers and manipulators of information about the company, its brands and its products. These people are the advertisers and promoters, and they take on the role of a manager who is able to seduce an employee into performing well. Thus surveillance extends beyond the company's boundaries, so professionals such as, doctors and ordinary citizens, like consumers, become legitimate targets. These individuals work for a corporation through their ability to consume or convince others to consume. The goal of surveillance within this construction is the tracking of information and the use of this information to seduce the chosen "employee" to perform. As an example of how the relationship between a company and an unsuspecting employee functions, I am going to focus on the medical professions and its relationship to the pharmaceutical industry in order to discuss how surveillance, and marketing create a rationalized system that entices people work. Those

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'employed' by the organization to promote its products and raise brand awareness introduce more fluid notions of 'employment' which go beyond the formal employment contract, the provision of one's labour and presence within the organization's premises.

Currently one of the hottest markets in the United States is the pharmaceutical industry. New medications are continually introduced, not because they are needed or because they offer any real advantage over already existent medications, but simply because they offer new money making potential. In order to launch a new medication and make it profitable, the pharmaceutical marketing companies need to identify the doctors who would potentially 'work' for them by prescribing the medication to their patients. Data collection, which has become extensive due to advances in technology, centralizes and organizes this information for the marketers. With the advent of sophisticated computer technology, pharmaceutical manufactures have been quietly compiling resumes on the prescribing patterns of the nation's health care professionals, many of which have no idea that their decisions are open to commercial scrutiny. Information has also been gained from patient records in pharmacies, which the pharmacies then sell to the pharmaceutical companies. The other source of information for the pharmaceutical companies is a master file, which they are able to buy from the American Medical Association. This file has detailed information on all the doctors practicing in the United States, including their medical education number, which the AMA assigns to new medical students in order to track them throughout their careers. The pharmaceutical companies track the doctors with this number as well.

After creating the prescriber profiles, the pharmaceutical companies work directly on the doctors. They gain the doctor's support by showering them with expensive dinners, gifts and honorariums to attend conferences about their medications. Drug representatives frequent the hospitals handing out coupons to the doctors for free coffees at Starbucks and arranging with head residents to cater buffet lunches at clinics. As the young doctors fill their plates at these lunches, the drug representatives lecture about the pills they are trying to market. Other kinds of gifts include tickets given to baseball games and even trips to the Bahamas for the doctor and his/ her family. This is how this type of employee is 'paid'. These 'tokens of appreciation' seem to have a powerful affect on the doctors and this is made clear by the many success stories of new drugs on the market. These medications achieve spectacular growth without any decisive advantage over their predecessors. Their only real advantage is the ability of the pharmaceutical companies to watch the doctors as closely as possible, gather as much detailed information as they can, and also for the doctors to be such diligent low paid employees.

On the other side of the fence is the consumer. It is common knowledge that consumers are being watched by corporations through their credit card purchases and activity on the Internet, in order to compile data on what, when and how they purchase. Just as the worker's tasks were broken down and analyzed by Taylorism, consumer taste is tracked and scrutinized. In the case of the pharmaceutical industry, patient's medical records, which were once private, are now accessible and this information is being used by the pharmaceutical industry to learn how to persuade consumers to buy their medications. One way to make this connection is through the doctors, as mentioned above, but another

way is through direct advertising to the consumer. Pharmaceutical companies are infamous for targeting consumers and getting the consumer to ask their doctor for specific medications. In effect, the consumer becomes a spokesperson for the pharmaceutical company by demanding to purchase the product and convincing the doctor of the drug's usefulness. The 'payment' to the consumer for working for the pharmaceutical company is simply the illusion that the chosen pill will cure their health problems. Generally the belief in this illusion is created through seductive advertisements, which rely on the consumer's anxiety and ignorance of medical conditions in order to coax them to ask for brand name medications. Recently even more direct avenues have been used to get the medication to the consumer. By surveilling individuals medical records, drug companies are able to target their audience with greater precision. In July 2002, a case was reported in the New York Times of a woman from Fort Lauderdale, Florida who received an unsolicited dosage of Prozac in the mail from her local Walgreens drugstore. Inside a letter stated "Enclosed you will find a free one month supply of Prozac Weekly. Congratulations on being one step to full recovery." By accessing her medical records, the drug company, Eli Lilly discovered that this woman had sought treatment for depression and therefore chose her for this unsolicited mailing. Unfortunately for Eli Lilly, the makers of Prozac Weekly, they went one step too far in connecting to the public and will face a lawsuit. The woman in Florida was not interested in being an employee of Eli Lilly. In most cases though, the pharmaceutical industry is extremely successful in gaining interest in their product. A recent report by the General Accounting Office estimates that every year at least 8.5 million Americans request and obtain specific prescriptions after seeing or hearing ads for particular drugs. On the whole, the pharmaceutical industry has been amazingly successful in having the consumer work for them. The consumer is a new kind of worker, a worker who produces by buying. And since consumers are not employed in the traditional sense, the methods to keep them working efficiently must be more attractive and captivating. Advertising is one of the most provocative forms which works to keep the consuming machine functioning in much the same way that a foreman kept the factory production line running quickly and smoothly. As long as the consumer is consuming he is doing his job.

Since Sept 11, 2001, the factors of surveillance and consumption have taken on new levels of intensity in the United States. This affects every area of the lives of each American, and particularly the relationship between the individual and large corporations. Using the excuse of the terrorist attack, the Bush Administration has created the Homeland Security Act. Among other things, this Act gives the green light to Bush's Total Information Awareness Program to use computer networks to scoop up vast amounts of data on citizens. In terms of the context of this discussion, this would make it legal to have free and easy access to an individual's personal medical records, amongst other intimate information. Why does the government need this information? To search out terrorists? Probably not, but maybe there are some clues in another aspect of the Security Act. In addition to having access to a vast array of personal information, the Homeland Security Act includes a provision that will protect all big pharmaceutical outfits from lawsuits. This is very convenient since presently there is a lawsuit being launched against Eli Lilly by parents who believe their children were harmed by a

vaccine sold by the company. Obviously, this has nothing to do with homeland security so, why is it there? Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that major drug companies have become a gigantic collective cash machine for politicians, and the vast majority of that cash goes to the Republicans. This is just one example of the symbiotic relationship between the United States government and big business. This is not a secret, and since it is common knowledge, what can be done about it? There is plenty that can be done by citizens, but perhaps less we can be done by consumers, who metaphorically work for large corporations. One has to wonder how effective a group of people who make professional decisions based on a free fancy dinner or make their health decisions based on an advertisement can be. These people may be very good workers, but not very effective workers activists. In fact, being more than just good workers, consumers are good patriots. As the placards around Manhattan said the weeks after September 11, 2001, "Support New York, Shop New York". Shopping is our real job - anything else would be unpatriotic.

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