Employee dissent on social media and organisational discipline

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Abstract

What kind of surveillance of employees is evident today? The rights of employers to police and act punitively with regard to workplace dissent and misbehaviour have become contentious legal, policy and ethical issues. Drawing on survey responses from employees in the UK and Australia, this study investigates the scope and scale of employee dissent in relation to critical online comments and the private use of social media during work time. The findings reveal a sufficient pool of misbehaviours, albeit that they are emergent and uneven. Also evident were some apparently contradictory responses with respect to employer rights to profile and discipline, at the same time as asserting employee rights to voice and private online identities. The findings contribute to knowledge of how much and what kinds of online dissent exist in the ambiguous space between the public sphere of work and the private lives of individual employees and what employers do about it.

Keywords

Online dissent, employee misbehaviour, social media and employment, public-private boundary, workplace surveillance

Introduction

The extent to which employers have the technological reach and right to police and act punitively with regard to employees who post critical online comments and use private social media during work time has become a contentious issue. Overlapping legal, policy and ethical dimensions have arisen concerning the scope and legitimacy of employee expression and corporate regulation (Berkelaar 2017; Ravazzani and Mazzei 2018). Irrespective of divergent interpretation, however, it appears incontestable that social media facilitate and also reflect dynamic shifts in public-private boundaries affecting work and the workplace in ways that reshape and disrupt employee/employer concerns and interests (McDonald and Thompson 2016). Yet our understanding of the scale and scope of dissent and misbehaviour, and the contours of the shifting nature of employer and employee social media conduct, remains nascent.

The focal issue for this paper is the extent to which employee use of social media tools constitutes a pool of 'misbehaviours' that management seek to identify and punish (See Figure 1). Furthermore, we explore to what extent such boundary changes have created new contexts for organisational contestation. Our main focus is on online dissent as a form of discursive challenge to, or disengagement from, expected standards of corporate- or managerially-defined norms. We consider online dissent to be consistent with broader notions of misbehaviour (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999), framed as conduct that does not conform to managerial norms and behavioural expectations, analogous to other counterproductive activities such as output restriction, pilferage and sabotage. Our focus is on two forms of employee-initiated online misbehaviours: online comments that are critical of an employees' organisation, workplace or management, and the use of private social media during work time. Contestation related to both of these types of dissent have featured prominently in media and legal cases, often where an employee has been disciplined or dismissed by their

employer. Yet they have received relatively less attention from employment relations researchers.

Drawing on survey responses from employees in the UK and Australia, the study advances knowledge by mapping a fuller range of online dissenting behaviours, their treatment by employers, and perceptions of the legitimacy of those practices. The study contributes to and advances the small, emerging body of research which addresses how online dissent manifests and how it shapes public-private boundaries, or what Schoneboom (2011) refers to as dialectical tensions between worker misbehaviour and organisational surveillance or discipline. Before turning to the empirical section of the article, we synthesise the available literature on employee dissent, and in light of this body of work, conceptualise dissenting misbehaviours in response to boundary changes.

Online dissent

There are two pertinent literatures with respect to refashioned employer powers relevant to employee dissent. First, mainstream human resource perspectives tend to address virtual channels as enabling more efficient, albeit sometimes less equitable employer choices (Ellison et al., 2007). In contrast, more critical perspectives draw attention to largely covert 'extractive approaches' that trawl blogs, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram in order to screen potential candidates, establish a 'sense of fit', 'weed out' those with 'questionable behaviours' and screen in those with good relational skills (Berkelaar, 2017: 11-12). Research has found that employer/managerial rationales for these practices include prevention of comments that are defamatory or derogatory towards the company, a duty to provide a safe and harassment-free environment, prevention of loss of confidential information, or compliance with mandatory legal reporting (Lam, 2016). While some of this may be

uncontentious, Lam (2016) argues that much monitoring is targeted, in part, at 'ordinary misbehaviours' such as jokes, gossip, rumours and disparaging remarks.

Moving from top-down surveillance to voices 'from below', occupationally-based work blogs and counterinstitutional 'gripe sites' such as RadioShackSucks.com (Gossett and Kilker 2006) constitute employee-led discourses that provide a variety of voice mechanisms that range from simple venting to satirical and critical commentary on corporate cultures and practices. Work oriented blogging emerged in the UK as a phenomenon in the early 2000s. . One example is 'Maid in London' (www.maidinlondonnow.blogspot.co.uk) which provides a means for hotel employees to write vividly about their experiences, highlighting the punitive work practices that are imposed by employers and largely ignored by guests. Other blog content reported in the literature include those used by emergency medical technicians (Richards and Kosmala, 2013) and IT administrators (Schoneboom, 2011).

This undercurrent of dissent offers potential opportunities to facilitate wider labour mobilisation. Schoneboom (2007), for example, cites examples such as the successful defence of Waterstone's blogger Joe Gordon who was sacked on the basis of gross misconduct for keeping an online diary in which he mentioned bad days at work and satirised his boss. Another example is Courpasson's (2017) account of a blog run over several years by French salespeople sacked by a leading company after refusing to sign a new contract, eventually forcing the company to seek mediation, fearing reputational damage. Richards (2008) also refers to self-organised resistance and misbehaviour, but is generally more cautious, affirming the extensive evidence of cynicism and distancing from the corporate sphere, but also noting that the limited number of explicitly resistance-oriented blogs (see also Richards and Kosmala, 2013). Caution is perhaps justified given that, as Schoneboom (2011) notes, early blogging waves diminished, at least partly due to the high rate of attrition connected to employer discipline and the difficulties bloggers faced in remaining anonymous.

Though blogging remains a source of employee voice, it has been somewhat dwarfed by the growth in scale and scope of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which may, although the extent of the shift is uncertain, be more difficult to control than traditional blogging (Schoneboom, 2011). Cohen and Richards (2015) argue that we are seeing a trend towards social media-facilitated narrative forms of employee resistance. At least three key studies have focused on the employee Facebook pages of Walmart, a ferociously anti-union employer that leaves little room for dissenting voice (see Caraway, 2016; Cohen and Richards, 2015; Wood, 2015). The main emphasis of the articles—the relationship between social media and the capacity for mobilisation or 'connective action'—is beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, the studies demonstrate how the site functions as a secure, informal, online space that can develop shared experiences and understandings of injustice, solidarity and collective identity. Whilst some participants were motivated to join actions and campaigns, Korczysnki (2003) defines the primary purpose of the group as a self-organised community of coping. This signifies an alternative, virtual means of alleviating work pressures in hostile or difficult work environments.

A further window into the process of online dissent is the regular stream of tribunal and court cases reported in the media, where disciplinary action is linked to venting on Facebook and other forums about managers, customers and sometimes co-workers. Recent examples include the case of Club 24 Ltd, where a team leader who had engaged in an exchange of messages with colleagues on Facebook after a difficult day, was suspended by her employer on the basis that the comments damaged the company's relationship with its main client (Redmans Employment, 2012). A further example is a binman who was sacked for criticising Council leaders online during a pay dispute for apparently breaching the Council's code of conduct (Deal, 2010). In these and many similar cases, employees asserted some version of a privacy argument, noting that posts were only visible or intended for

personal networks, and that social media sites were merely places to vent. In general, employee assertions of privacy or private space have seldom been legally supported, illustrating how social media have de facto abolished much of what people have traditionally regarded as private conduct (McDonald and Thompson 2016).

The examples above refer to individual organisational discipline, often in a context where official regulation is weak or absent. Unsurprisingly, there are now widespread warnings to organisations to establish robust, well communicated social media policies that set rules for and limits on employee expression (Lam, 2016). To date, there has been little research concerning moves to more extensively codify rules and mutual obligations governing employee conduct. One of the few exceptions is Thornthwaite's (2015) account of the content of social media policies and codes in Australia. Drawing on a sample of 15 codes, she concludes that the extension of regulation of off-duty use of social media has the potential to repress employee voice, although the breadth of scope and restriction varied considerably.

Private use of social media in work time

The above codes deal primarily with the potential impact of dissent on corporate reputation. There are, however, other forms of social media-facilitated employee misbehaviour. An obvious, but significantly under-researched issue is that of time appropriation via the use of private social media at work. Although employers in some sectors have policies on the availability of and access to social media at work, the extent of the problem is at present largely impressionistic. Media and managerial sources have identified general apprehensions that 'employers may be concerned that employees are spending too long using company computers for personal reasons: sending personal emails, updating social network accounts, and shopping online' (Furber, 2014: 1). A senior analyst at the bank of England recently

blamed 'a crisis of attention' for UK productivity decline, the cause of which is the trend towards BYOD (bring your own device), where employees constantly check their devices during work time (Stubbington, 2017).

In some other sectors such as retail and transport, employee-owned devices such as smartphones have been banned (e.g. Perkins, 2014), though employees may try to subvert the rules by concealing devices under counters or desks or accessing them during breaks (Light, 2014: 88, 92). Employers are also increasingly utilising tracking devices to counter 'time thieves'. These activities have attracted new labels— cyberloafing, wilfing, or surfing the web without any real purpose. Summarising various surveys, Lewis (2007) describes wilfing as a 'new British pastime'. An example is a Freedom of Information request by *The Times* which led to the revelation that officers from 20 police forces had made 1.8 million visits to and spent 90,000 hours on Facebook in the previous 12 months (Kenber, 2011). More authoritative surveys by the American Management Association have also received some academic coverage (e.g. Lam, 2016).

Conceptualising misbehaviour in response to boundary changes

Disruptions and boundary changes should not be seen solely through the lens of top-down surveillance, or as the uncontested spread of employer disciplinary practices. That would repeat the mistake of some early views of lean production and call centre technologies (see Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995). Disruption is also bottom-up, given that employees, whether at home or work, are also interacting with social media technologies. As Light (2014: 80) observes, social networking sites have both blurred the lines between work and non-work arrangements and extended the number of people engaging with work arrangements via digital media. Social media facilitates a wide audience for views and behaviours that were once confined to close, physical networks. Some reports indicate that students show 'a

remarkable lack of concern with the content they are willing to share' (see Curran et al., 2014: 2). Furthermore, there is a large gap between what students perceive someone can learn about them and what HR professionals want to discover (skills, habits, associations, unethical behaviours). Lack of awareness about the consequences of personal disclosure across multiple audiences and hyper-connected web networks can be linked to the idea of context collapse. As Davis and Jurgenson (2014) note, the rise of social media often blurs the public and private, professional and personal, and the many different selves and situations in which individuals present themselves.

Social media connections and disconnections reflect the emergence of potential tensions between social actors. McDonald and Thompson (2016) set out a model that proposes how employee concerns for the assertion of private identity, voice and autonomy to engage with others, at and away from the workplace, potentially clash with employer interests in performativity, protection of reputation and regulation of time. The model acknowledges the differences between classic control and resistance, and direction and response, conceptualising the differences in terms of discontinuous technologies and (partially) asymmetric employer and employee concerns. With respect to the former, the main theorist of technical control, Richard Edwards (1979), conceived of the assembly line as systematically embedded in work structures. The same applies to later research on automated call distribution in call centres (Taylor and Bain, 1999). In contrast, when managers access social media technologies to monitor and discipline workers, the tools they utilise are located largely outside the workplace and are therefore discontinuous to the labour process (though there are exceptions, notably the tracking of workplace-based computer use). At the same time, employees may be using the same technologies, but for entirely different purposes, such as to manage aspects of their private sphere. Hence, the technological and social discontinuities create potential for a collision of concerns.

Returning to the focal issue of the extent of a 'pool of misbehaviours', new discursive spaces for dissenting and divergent viewpoints have opened, but we need to know more about the depth of this pool of misbehaviours. Coverage of court cases is by definition episodic and arbitrary, and blogs, though fascinating, are not necessarily typical of employee social media expression. Furthermore, most of the studies of employee-led social media networks are based on very small samples that are inevitably activist-focused. Meanwhile, reports of 'time theft' are limited by their media and consultancy origins. Given the early stages of such developments and the difficulty of investigating them, we know very little about the wider nature of ordinary misbehaviours.

This study attempts to address this evidence gap across two samples (n = 2000) via a large-scale survey of working-age adults in the UK and Australia. The research questions were developed from neglected areas of extant work identified in the above review and build on two dimensions of online dissent in McDonald and Thompson's (2016) broader model of social media conduct at work. Firstly, critical online comments are rationalised by employees to *voice* authentic work experiences to employee peers or to those outside the workplace. In contrast, employers often claim that critical online comments threaten their interests in protecting their *reputation* and promoting a positive brand image. Secondly, employees can rationalise their use of social media during work time as claims to *autonomy,* whereas the competing terrain for employers is an interest in the *regulation of employee time,* which they may monitor via surveillance strategies and enforce via disciplinary means (McDonald and Thompson, 2016).

This study builds on this conceptual work by exploring the dynamics of discipline and dissent that arise from particular forms of social media misbehaviours. We explore these issues in a large, representative sample of workers in Australia and the UK; countries with shared linguistic and cultural contexts but somewhat different industrial relations system in

that Australia is often considered to be more highly regulated. Specifically, we developed a comprehensive survey to explore: (1) employees' tendency to post critical online content about their employers, managers or co-workers; (2) employees' propensity to use social media during work time; (3) the extent of organisational regulation of these practices; and (4) employees' attitudes regarding their own as well as employer rights in relation to these practices. The utilisation of large samples across two countries allowed for an assessment of which phenomena are likely to be more context-specific. Since the current study is primarily exploratory, we do not make any explicit predictions regarding these phenomena.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Methods

Participants and procedure

Participants included 1000 workers from Australia and 1000 workers from the UK (total n = 2000). Participants were recruited using a large panel research company which had access to several hundred-thousand members in Australia and the UK. In order to obtain the desired sample size, the survey was sent to a subset of approximately 2000 members in each country and consequently the response rate was close to 50%. We utilised a large sample size to maximise statistical power and to provide sufficient numbers of individuals in demographic groupings to make comparisons. We sought to recruit a representative sample and therefore instructed the research company to administer the survey on the basis of key demographic characteristics of the adult working populations in Australia and the UK (age, gender, occupation, industry, work status). Broadly consistent with population characteristics of Australia and the UK, our final sample comprised 47% females and 53% males aged between 18 and 78 (mean age = 42, SD = 12.51). The majority (73%) was in employed in full

or part-time ongoing work, whereas a minority was in casual work (10%) or self-employed (11%).

Participants were from occupations and industries broadly consistent with the population characteristics of Australian and UK workers. Major occupational groups included professional occupations (26.1%), administrative and secretarial occupations (21.2%), managers, directors, senior officials (11.2%), and sales and customer service (9%). Major industry category's included Education (10.7%), Health and Social Work (10.5%), Professional, Manufacturing, Scientific and Technical (7.1%), and Information and Communication (7.1%). The final sample adequately represented employees working in highly-skilled, computer intensive positions (e.g. professionals, managers). There was a slight over-representation of individuals in lower skilled administrative roles and a slight under-representation of individuals in lower-skilled manual roles. Nearly half the participants (48%) came from large organizations (i.e. 200+ employees), one quarter (25%) from medium organisations (20-199 employees), and a similar percentage (27%) from small (19 or less) organisations. It is likely that minor differences between sample and population characteristics did not affect our substantive conclusions because large studies (e.g., Mullinix, Leeper, Druckman, & Freese, 2015) have demonstrated that even non-representative online surveys provide results that are highly similar to nationally representative population-based samples. Consequently, we are confident that our results are meaningful and largely generalizable to the relevant populations.

Measures

Employee attitudes and behaviours relating to organisational dissent and misbehaviour as well as organisational regulation of these behaviours were explored with a 77-item online survey designed specifically for this study. On the first page of the survey, we defined social media as 'internet based applications where individuals and communities share online

content, including social networking sites (e.g., Facebook); private email; blogs and microblogs (e.g., Twitter); content communities (e.g., YouTube); virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft); and virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life)'. Previous scales measuring our variables of interest were not available; hence, we developed a new set of items designed to operationalise focal variables. These items included both single item measures of narrow, unidimensional variables (i.e. measures of explicit knowledge, concrete behaviours, or specific events) and a combination of single and multiple item measures of employee attitudes regarding misbehaviour. To maximize the precision of our measures, we pilot tested all items on a convenience sample of five employees from different occupations. Question wording was modified where appropriate to ensure shared understanding of question wording across participants

Participant knowledge of relevant policies and consequences of dissent/misbehaviour.
We used single item measures to assess employees' knowledge of whether their organisation had policies regarding dissent and private use of social media during work time (e.g. "Does your organisation have a policy that bans employees from making comments critical to the organisation on social media?" Response options included: "Yes", "No", "I don't know"). In order to examine perceived consequences of dissent/misbehaviour, we also used several single item measures (e.g. "If you have personally posted critical comments online, have you ever been disciplined or sacked for this?"). Participants responded to these items on a four-point rating scale including 'yes', 'no', 'I don't know' and 'not relevant'.

The extent of online dissent and misbehaviour. We used multiple single item measures to assess the extent to which employees engaged in online dissent (e.g. "I post critical comments online about my organisation on social media"). Participants responded to these questions on a 4 point rating scale ranging from 1=never, to 4=always. Private use of social media during work time was assessed with a single item measure "How much time per day - on average -

do you spend on personal online activities during work time"). Participants responded to this item on a five-point rating scale ranging from 1 = less than five minutes, to 5 = more than 2 hours. We used multiple single item measures to assess the extent to which employees have witnessed online dissent and its consequences.

Participant attitudes regarding online dissent and misbehaviour. We constructed 10 single item measures to assess specific attitudes based on McDonald & Thompson's (2016) conceptual model of social media use at work. These items were designed to gauge employee perceptions of their own and their employers' rights regarding dissent, private use of social media, and the regulation of these behaviours (e.g. "Employees have a right to voice their work experiences by posting critical online comments about their jobs/organisation"). Participants responded to all attitudinal questions on a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Prior to running analyses on these items, we subjected them to an exploratory factor analysis (EFA).

A note on our use of single item measures. Single item measures were deemed appropriate for use in this study because they were designed to assess either *explicit* knowledge, *concrete* behaviors or *specific* events which can be precisely measured using single items (Fuchs & Diamantopoulus, 2009). Multiple-item scales, which could technically have been utilized, would have resulted in fewer overall variables measured, compromising the scope of our investigation (see Fraser, Matthews, and Gibbons, 2015). Nevertheless, as well as pilot testing to ensure shared understanding of question wording, we also conducted an EFA on our attitudinal items to test for the presence of broader attitudes underlying participant responses on these items.

Statistical analyses

Since the primary research questions relate to the *extent* of attitudes, behaviours and regulation associated with social media, we used a combination of descriptive and inferential

statistics. Descriptive statistics (primarily response frequencies and item means) describe the extent of attitudes, behaviours and knowledge, and inferential statistics (primarily standard errors) measured the accuracy at which our descriptive statistics reflect population characteristics (i.e. all employees in Australia and all employees in the UK). Additionally, following each descriptive analysis, a set of further exploratory, inferential analyses were conducted to determine whether key demographic variables influence attitudes, behaviours and knowledge associated with social media use broadly. These exploratory analyses compared frequency of categorical responses over demographic groups and consequently utilised Logistic Regression and/or Chi Square analyses. Finally, we conducted an EFA on attitudinal items to investigate the possible presence of latent factors underlying participant attitudes regarding dissent and private use of social media during work time.

Results

This section is structured in accordance with the primary research questions: 1) the extent that organisations regulate critical online comments and private use of social media during work time through policy; 2a) the extent to which employees post critical online comments; 2b) the extent employees experience disciplinary actions resulting from posting critical online comments; 3a) the extent to which employees' use social media for private/personal reasons during work time; 3b) the extent to which employees experience disciplinary actions resulting from their private use of social media during work time; and 4) employee attitudes regarding their and their employer's rights in relation to these practices. Following the focal analyses for several of these research questions, we conducted follow-up analyses related to organisational and demographic predictors of respective outcome variables.

1. To what extent do organisations regulate critical online comments and private use of social media during work time through policy?

Frequency distributions reveal that the majority of participants (81.6%) reported they had knowledge regarding whether their organisation had a policy about dissent on social media. Of these participants, a slight majority (59.2%) indicated that their organisation had such a policy. Table 1 indicates frequencies for Australia and the UK separately. The difference between the UK and Australia on this variable was not significant Chi^2 (1, n = 1631) = .149, p = .699).

A similar set of results were found regarding organisations' use of policies about personal online activities during work time (Table 2). Again, frequency distributions reveal that the majority of participants indicated knowledge of whether their organisation had a policy regarding personal online activity (90.1%), and also that their organisation used such a policy (67.0%). There was a significant difference between Australia and the UK, with more employees from the UK reporting their employer had a policy regarding personal online activities during work time, Chi^2 (1, n = 1801) = 7.42, p = .006).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

As a follow up to this first research question, we then examined whether specific organisational characteristics were associated with the use of policies about dissent on social media and private use of social media during work time. To do this, we conducted two binary logistic regressions with 1) presence of a policy regarding dissent on social media as the dependent variable and 2) presence of a policy regarding private use of social media as the dependent variable. We focused on major demographic organisational characteristics which included country (UK vs Australia), industry type, size of organisation, and computer use. The first analysis revealed that when combined, these demographic variables collectively

predicted presence of a policy, Chi^2(23, n = 1631) = 333.52, p<.001. When evaluated individually, organisational size and the extent of computer use within organisations were found to be the major organisational characteristics predictive of dissent being regulated through organisational policies. Specifically, large organisations (200+ employees) were more likely than small organisations (less than 20 employees), to use a policy, $exp(B)$ = .13, p <.001. Organisations in which all/nearly all (80-100%) employees used computers were more likely than organisations where no or few (0-20%) employees used computers, to use a policy, $exp(B)$ = .53, p <.001.

The second binary logistic regression analysis revealed that these demographic variables combined also predicted presence of a policy regarding private use of social media at work, Chi^2 (23, n = 1801) = 283.33, p<.001. When evaluated individually, organisational size was found to be the major organisational characteristic predicting the presence of such policies. Specifically, large organisations (200+ employees) were more likely than small organisations (less than 20 employees) to have policies regarding private online activities during work time $exp(B)$ = -.17, p <.001.

<div align="center">INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE</div>

2a. To what extent do employees post critical content about their employers, managers or coworkers?

A series of descriptive analyses determined the extent to which respondents reported posting critical content online via social media. Chi square analyses were also conducted to compare frequency of responses across employees from Australia and the UK. Table 3 indicates that a small but substantial minority of participants from Australia (approximately 11%) reported that they posted critical comments about their employer and/or colleagues on social media sites at least some of the time. Participants from the UK were significantly more

likely to report posting critical comments at least some of the time (approximately 18%) (see table 3 for statistics and significance levels). Participants were much more likely to report witnessing others post dissenting comments online rather than doing it personally. Again, this figure was higher for participants in the UK, however the difference was not as extreme as for the questions regarding personal dissent.

To provide an estimate of the extent to which these results reflect population values, we calculated mean scores for each question in table 3 along with standard errors across the two countries. As illustrated in table 3, standard errors for mean scores on each question were very low indicating that population means for these questions across both countries are similar to sample means.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

As a follow up to this research question, we then examined whether key demographic characteristics of employees increased or decreased their likelihood of posting critical comments about their organisation. Chi square analyses revealed that females were less likely than males to post critical comments about their organisation Chi^2 (3, $n = 2000$) = 38.04, $p < .001$, as were people working in smaller rather than larger organisations Chi^2 (6, $n = 2000$) = 30.33, $p < .001$). Further, employees were more likely to report posting critical comments in organisations that tended to use more computers Chi^2 (12, $n = 2000$) = 96.13, $p < .001$) and that managers and supervisors were slightly more likely to post critical comments about their organisation than individuals in other occupations Chi^2 (3, $n = 2000$) = 57.19, $p < .001$). These significant effects were found for all types of dissenting comments (i.e. regarding employers, organisations and co-workers).

2b. To what extent are employees disciplined for posting critical content about their
employers, managers or co-workers?

To determine the extent to which employees were disciplined for posting critical
comments, we examined the frequency of individuals who reported posting dissenting
comments who had been disciplined or sacked as a consequence. Table 4 indicates that
significantly more employees from the UK (15.2%) experience negative consequences for
posting dissenting comments than participants from Australia (10.1%). Overall, 12.7% of the
sample who had posted dissenting comments online reported being disciplined or sacked for
doing so.

INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

3a. To what extent do employees use social media during work time?

Table 5 summarises the amount of time per day (on average) participants reported
spending on personal online activities (e.g. private emails, social networking, surfing the net)
during work time. Frequency distributions indicate that the majority of participants (75.2%)
spent less than 60 minutes per day on such activities. A small, but nevertheless substantial
minority (8.1%) reported spending more than one hour per day on personal online activities.
Employees from the UK tended to report slightly more time spent on personal online
activities than employees from Australia, Chi^2 (5, $n = 2000$) = 12.70, $p = .026$

INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

3b. To what extent are employees disciplined for using social media for personal reasons
during work time?

To determine the extent to which employees are disciplined for using social media for
personal reasons during work time, we examined the frequency by which employees had

been disciplined or sacked as a consequence of personal online activity. Table 6 indicates that only a small proportion of participants from the UK (7.0%) and Australia (5.3%) reported negative consequences for personal online activity. The difference between the two countries was not significant Chi^2 (2, n = 2000) = 4.03, p = .133. Table 6 also indicates that only a minority of employees from the UK (5.1%) and Australia (3.9%) had been punished for accessing social media not suitable for work. Again, the difference between the two countries was not significant, Chi^2 (2, n = 2000) = 3.69, p = .158.

INSERT TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

4. What are employees' attitudes regarding their own as well as employer rights in relation to these practices?

This research question was answered in two parts. First, we conducted a factor analysis on all 10 attitudinal items to explore relationships between specific attitudes and to determine whether responses to attitudinal questions reflect broad underlying attitudes. Second, we analysed the extent of specific employee attitudes regarding their own and employer rights. The factor analysis[1] revealed 3 correlated factors with eigenvalues above 1 (3.37, 2.17, 1.25 respectively) that collectively accounted for 68% of the variance in original items (see Table 7). The first factor was termed "positive attitudes regarding employee autonomy" and consisted of the items: "employees have a right to engage with others outside the workplace using emails during work time", "employees have a right to engage with others outside the workplace using private social networking sites during work time", "employees have a right to engage with others outside the workplace using a mobile phone, even if provided by the employer", and "employees have a right to use private email/social media during work time that is equivalent to the time they spend working at home or outside work

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[1] A common factor analysis (principal axis factoring) with oblique rotation was conducted.

hours". All items had loadings of above .6 and when combined, formed a scale with an alpha of .85.

The second factor was termed "positive attitudes regarding employer rights" and comprised the items "employers should have written policies in place that define their expectations of social media in the workplace", "employers have a right to discipline employees for spending what they consider as too much time on private emails/social media during work time", and "employers have a right to protect their business interests by disciplining employees for making critical comments online about their jobs/organisation". All items had loadings above .5 and when combined, formed a scale with an alpha of .73.

The third factor was termed "positive attitudes regarding employer intrusions" and was comprised the items "employers have a right to monitor the content of employee's private social media sites if they use a work computer during work time" and "employers have a right to monitor the content of employee's private emails if sent from a work computer and a work email address". Both items had loadings of above .8 and when combined formed a scale with an alpha of .83. The final item "Employees have a right to voice their work experiences by posting critical online comments about their jobs/organisation" did not load on any of the 3 factors and was consequently treated as a stand-alone variable.

INSERT TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE

To gauge the *extent* of specific attitudes regarding employer and employee rights in relation to social media, we examined the extent of participant agreement with 4 specific attitudinal questions. These questions constituted a core element in one of the 3 factors described above in addition to the one item that did not load on the extracted factors. Additionally, because these items loaded highly on their respective factors (with the exception of the 4th, standalone item), it is likely participants had common interpretations of

these questions. Table 8 indicates that the majority of employees from both Australia and the

UK believed that employers have the right to protect their business interests by disciplining

employees for dissent (67.6% and 64.6% respectively), and to a lesser extent, monitor social

media content (44.6% and 42.3% respectively). Somewhat inconsistent with this, however,

the majority of participants either agreed with or were neutral regarding the statement that

employees have the right to voice their work experiences by posting critical comments (53.5

and 61%), and to a lesser extent the right to engage with others outside the workplace whilst

at work (56.0% and 58.1%).

There was a slight yet significant tendency for participants from the UK compared to

participants from Australia to agree that employees had the right to post critical comments.

Interestingly, however, this difference was not as great as the self-reported behaviour

regarding the posting of critical comments. In other words, although participants from the UK

were only slightly more likely to feel that employees have the right to post critical comments

(25.9% vs 23.5%), they were much more likely to actually post critical comments than

participants from Australia (18% vs 11%).

INSERT TABLE 8 ABOUT HERE

Table 9 summarises responses to the question "How much time per day (on average)

do you think is reasonable for an employee to spend on personal online activities?" There

were slight differences across the UK and Australia in response to this question, Chi^2 (5, $N =$

2000) = 19.58, $p < .001$, with relatively more employees from Australia believing that

between five and 30 minutes is reasonable (49.0% vs 40.8%), and relatively more employees

from the UK believing that between 31 and 60 minutes is reasonable (14.6% vs 10.5%).

Employees were generally consistent in their attitudes and behaviour on this variable (see

Table 5), with the exception being that a substantial portion of employees who feel that

spending more than five minutes time on personal activities per day is reasonable actually report spending less than five minutes on personal activities. This was the case for participants from both Australia and the UK.

INSERT TABLE 9 ABOUT HERE

As a follow up to the fourth research question, we conducted a series of chi square analyses to explore whether key demographic characteristics of employees were related to their attitudes regarding their own and employers' rights about posting dissenting comments. Analyses revealed that females were more likely than males to agree that employers had the right to protect themselves, Chi^2 (1, $n = 1520$) = 8.01, $p = .004$ but less likely to agree that employees have the right to voice their work experiences Chi^2 (1, $n = 1349$) = 44.53, $p < .001$. Education did not predict beliefs regarding employer rights but did predict beliefs regarding employee rights (i.e. the more educated felt employees had the right to voice their experiences, Chi^2 (8, $n = 1349$) = 18.81, $p < .05$). There were no significant differences between supervisors/managers in terms of their beliefs regarding employers and employee rights (all 4 questions from table 7 were tested and no significant differences were found).

Discussion and conclusions

The significant nature of and connections between online dissent and discipline is confirmed in the results of the survey. With respect to critical online comments, 14% of employees reported they had posted comments about their employer at least sometimes and nearly half had witnessed others doing so. In the sphere of time appropriation, more than one-third of the sample spent less than five minutes and a similar proportion five to 30 minutes on 'personal online activities'. One in five respondents reported conducting private activity online for between 30 minutes to more than two hours per day.

There is little contemporary research data to which we can explicitly compare these figures, but there seems little doubt that they constitute a sufficient pool of misbehaviours to signify some level of contestation. An obvious objection is that the dissenting and disengaging actions are undertaken by a minority of workers, in some cases quite small ones. However, no-one has ever suggested that the historic kinds of misbehaviours discussed in the sociological and organisational literatures—pilferage, absenteeism and sabotage—were necessarily undertaken by majorities of workers (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Dubois, 1977; Jermier, 1988). The 'recognition' threshold is surely that the behaviours were of sufficient significance for management to seek to regulate and control.

This interpretation is confirmed when looking at the other side of the coin. The majority of respondents' workplaces had formal social media policies and monitored related activities. While the extent of monitoring may be perceived to be less than expected, two qualifications should be noted. First, some monitoring may be covert; which by definition would obfuscate the true extent of the practice. Second, in our sample of workers employed in all key occupational groups, there will inevitably be a proportion of respondents in workplaces without, or with low IT usage, and who will report that they are not monitored.

The willingness of employers to take coercive action was notable, with results suggesting that nearly 13% of respondents who had posted critical comments had been disciplined, with a further 23% witnessing discipline. In Hurrell et al.'s (2017) study, one third of the students who reported employer disapproval of social media activity at work had been formerly warned or disciplined. In contrast, our figures for discipline related to private use of social media at work are lower (6% and 4% in the two categories). However, our sample of respondents had a wider set of occupational characteristics than students, suggesting that electronic surveillance and direct intervention are uneven or that management in some contexts has a degree of tolerance of low level misbehaviours. Again, this is not

inconsistent with traditional patterns of accommodation in managerial response to work limitation and time appropriation by employees (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999: 78-80).

Turning to the question of private use of social media, almost all employees engaged in online activities in work time, though most for short durations. However, nearly one in five respondents reported spending between 30 minutes to more than two hours per day online. As with dissenting voice, though a minority, it is sizeable enough to indicate a significant time appropriation problem for management. When we compare this to what people think is reasonable to spend on social media at work, we see a fairly similar pattern, with the majority—three quarters— saying less than 30 minutes per day is reasonable and a minority of around 18% who think 30 minutes or more is acceptable. This may indicate new informal accommodations around private time in which the employer and employee operate a degree of mutual tolerance of the reconfiguration of the work-life boundary. As indicated above, many of those who reported spending less than five minutes a day on personal activities think it is reasonable to spend more.

The survey also attempted to chart the subjective dimensions of emergent contestation such as whether employees contest employer actions and rationales with respect to social media surveillance and discipline. The evidence was mixed, if not contradictory. On the issue of whether employers have a right to protect their business interests through disciplining employees for critical posts, two-thirds of respondents completely agreed or somewhat agreed whereas only one in 10 disagreed. However, the majority (57%) was either neutral or supportive of employees' rights to post critical online comments. Similarly, on the issue of whether employers have a right to monitor the content of employees' social media use, nearly half of employees agreed that employers have this right, whereas only one in three disagreed. However, over half of employees were neutral or agreed that employees have a right to engage with others outside of work using private social media during work time. These

findings confirm similar contradictions over employer rights to profile and employee rights to maintain private online identities (McDonald, Thompson and O'Connor 2016).

What might help explain some of these apparently contradictory responses where respondents endorsed both employer rights to monitor and discipline at the same time as asserting employee rights to voice and private online identities? Methodologically, it is possible that the ubiquitous language of rights might have skewed both sets of responses in a more positive direction. The fact that higher levels of education was a predictor of support for employee rights supports this possibility. What might be even more pertinent is to return to the theme of parallel purpose in actors' use of social media. Ellerbrook's (2010) observation that individuals use social media such as Facebook to assert a variety of forms of visibility as part of peer networks is relevant here. Though rival concerns around resources such as identity and time may conflict, for example when employees who comment critically on their work run into opposition from organisations seeking to defend their reputation, they often arise from different directions and are used for distinctive purposes by employment relations actors. This is partly a reflection of the platforms themselves, which leak into but remain external to the workplace.

Complex and contradictory perceptions of the legitimacy of discipline and dissent are also likely to reflect the tensions in connective practices discussed earlier. Perpetual connectivity sometimes enables access to employee social networks, for example through 'friending' practices (Jeske and Schultz 2015). However, there is some evidence of varying levels of awareness of the contexts in which connectivity is embedded and enacted. Hurrell et al. (2017) are more optimistic than previously cited studies such as Curran et al (2014) about Generation Y students, in the sense that their survey results showed that most appeared, after the threat of employer access of personal social networking information, to manage their profiles more actively.

Indeed, there is some evidence (McDonald, Thompson and O'Connor 2016; Light, 2014) that employees in general, and young people in particular, are getting savvier about privacy. Light (2014: 86-88) argues that though people are under pressure to perform connectivity in accessing employment, some are increasingly engaging in 'disconnective practice', where employees change their behaviours to avoid talking about work in 'public' spaces. We should also not underestimate the sense of connectedness and empowerment that social media technologies provide. Cavazotte et al's. study of a Brazilian law firm (2014) showed evidence of ambiguous motives, rationales and consequences of perpetual connectivity, including unwitting intensification, demonstrating that employees are aware of trade-offs and are sometimes cynical about employer demands and their own reactions.

The kind of survey data drawn on here has limitations in the inferences that can be made about actors' motives and the contextual factors that may explain them. For example, we found a greater propensity of UK employees to post and witness critical comments online. While there is no obvious clue from the demographics as to why that might be the case, one possible explanation would be the relatively informal nature of UK shop floor relations compared to Australia's more regulated employment context which may serve to 'chill' online dissent (Findlay and Thompson 2017). In a research context where the pertinent evidence has been limited and episodic, access to large scale survey evidence in two countries makes an important contribution by providing unique insights about the social media behaviour and attitudes of employees. Despite the asymmetric origin of some of the rival concerns of actors, there is sufficient social media related recalcitrance to constitute a contemporary dilemma of managerial control. This evidence provides support for McDonald and Thompson's (2016) conceptual model that claims emergent contestation around rival concerns on social media and the employment relationship. It also complements smaller scale, qualitative studies of online dissent. The focus on the employee is a particularly

important contribution. It is critical that a new generation of social science studies does not repeat the mistakes of previous eras, where analyses of surveillance were understood in a top down and one-sided manner. In providing a wealth of employee-centred data, this paper contributes to a more balanced and comprehensive picture.

As boundaries shift incrementally and often 'behind the backs' of participants, it should be emphasised that various forms of contestation are still highly emergent as employment relations actors navigate and learn from their experiences. They are also uneven in that conflict is inevitably concentrated in technology-intensive settings, and in larger organisations with significant computer use. However, given the increase of monitoring and extractive tools available for corporate use and the spread of platform business models dependent on algorithmic control, the number of those settings is likely to expand considerably. This creates opportunities for further research in such contexts, building on work that is just beginning to emerge (e.g., Wood 2018). Future research could usefully investigate the extent and nature of new patterns of accommodation and conflict between management and employees around acceptable forms of social media conduct. This extends into the policy arena, where existing approaches too often reply on overly-broad prescriptions against 'inappropriate behaviours' that allow employers wide scope to bring allegations of misconduct or preclude collective discussion of work-based issues. The number of often bitter disputes points to the need for transparent social media codes and policies that are perceived to be workable and equitable for all parties.

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Table 1. Overall frequency of respondents who reported that their organisation did/did not have a policy about dissent on social media sites.

	Australia		UK		Total	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Organisation has policy	476	58.7	489	59.6	965	59.2
Organisation does not have policy	335	41.3	331	40.4	666	40.8

Table 2. Overall frequency of respondents who reported that their organisation did/did not have a policy about online activities during work time.

	Australia		UK		Total	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Organisation has policy	576	64.0	631	70.0	1207	67.0
Organisation does not have policy	324	36.0	270	30.0	594	33.0

Table 3. The extent of employee dissent via social media sites.

Question	Response	Australia		United Kingdom		(df) Chi^2
		n	*%*	*n*	*%*	
1. I post critical comments online about my employer, manager or supervisor on social media sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, blog)	Always (1)	33	3.3	51	5.1	
	Often (2)	25	2.5	76	7.6	
	Sometimes (3)	53	5.3	49	4.9	
	Never (4)	889	88.9	824	82.4	(3)
						32.23**
Mean (S.E.)		3.80	(.02)	3.65	(.03)	
2. I post critical comments online about my organisation on social media sites	Always (1)	29	2.9	54	5.4	
	Often (2)	30	3.0	66	6.6	
	Sometimes (3)	52	5.2	57	5.7	(3)
	Never (4)	889	88.9	823	82.3	23.80**
Mean (S.E.)		3.80	(.02)	3.65	(.03)	
3. I post critical comments online about my co-workers on social media sites	Always (1)	28	2.8	50	5.0	
	Often (2)	30	3.0	67	6.7	
	Sometimes (3)	51	5.1	53	5.3	(3)
	Never (4)	891	89.1	830	83.0	22.51**
Mean (S.E.)		3.81	(.02)	3.66	(.03)	
4. I have witnessed critical comments posted by another employee on social media sites about their organisation, manager, employer or co-workers	Always (1)	53	5.3	86	8.6	
	Often (2)	79	7.9	145	14.5	
	Sometimes (3)	286	28.6	282	28.2	
	Never (4)	582	58.2	487	48.7	(3)
						35.75**
Mean (S.E.)		3.40	(.03)	3.17	(.03)	

[1] ** indicates $p < .001$

Table 4. The consequences of employee dissent via social media sites.

Question	Response	Australia		United Kingdom		(df)
		n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*Chi²*
1. If you have personally posted critical comments online, have you ever been disciplined or sacked for this?	Not Relevant	545	54.5	519	51.9	
	Yes	46	4.6 (10.1²)	73	7.3 (15.2)	
	No	380	3.8 (83.5)	392	39.2 (81.5)	(1)
	I don't know	29	2.9 (6.4)	16	1.6 (3.3)	4.61*
2. If you have witnessed critical online comments, has the person who made the comments been disciplined or sacked?	Not Relevant	364	36.4	320	32.0	
	Yes	126	12.6 (19.8³)	180	18.0 (26.5)	
	No	365	36.5 (57.4)	386	38.6 (56.6)	(1)
	I don't know	145	14.5 (22.8)	114	11.4 (16.9)	4.82*

[1] * indicates $p < .05$. [2] Chi² statistics in this table are based only on 'yes' vs 'no' categories. [3]Values in parentheses represent percentages of those who have posted dissenting comments online. [4] Values in parentheses represent percentages of those who have witnessed others posting dissenting comments online.

Table 5. Time spent on personal online activities during work time.

	Australia		United Kingdom		Total	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Less than 5 minutes	388	38.8	366	36.6	754	37.7
5 - 30 mins	394	39.4	356	35.6	750	37.5
31 - 60 mins	103	10.3	135	13.5	238	11.9
1 to 2 hours	49	4.9	49	49	98	4.9
More than 2 hours	23	2.3	40	4.0	63	3.2
I don't know	43	4.3	54	54	97	4.9

Table 6. The consequences of personal online activity at work.

Question	Response	Australia		United Kingdom	
		n	*%*	*n*	*%*
1. Have you ever been disciplined, reprimanded or sacked for spending too much time on personal online activities during work time (e.g. personal phone calls, private email, social networking, surfing the internet)?	Yes	53	5.3	70	7.0
	No	918	91.8	910	91.0
	Don't know	29	2.9	20	2.0
2. Have you ever been disciplined, reprimanded or sacked for accessing social media or technology not suitable for work during work time (e.g. for accessing restricted material online)?	Yes	39	3.9	51	5.1
	No	932	93.2	930	93.0
	Don't know	29	2.9	19	1.9

Table 7. Correlations between broad attitudes regarding employee and employer rights in relation to social media use.

Broad attitudes based on results of EFA	1	2	3
1. Positive attitudes regarding employee autonomy			
2. Positive attitudes regarding employer rights	-.14**		
3. Positive attitudes regarding employer intrusions	-.14**	.36**	
4. Belief that employees have a right to voice their experiences online	.39**	-.27**	-.07**

[1] ** indicates $p < .001$

Table 8. Employee attitudes regarding their own and employers' rights around posting dissenting comments.

Question	Response	Australia		United Kingdom		(df)
		n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*Chi²*
1. Employers have a right to protect their business interests by disciplining employees for making critical comments online about their jobs/organisation.	Agree	676	67.6	646	64.6	
	Neutral	232	23.2	248	24.8	(1)
	Disagree	92	9.2	106	10.6	1.50
2. Employees have a right to voice their work experiences by posting critical online comments about their jobs/organisation.	Agree	235	23.5	259	25.9	
	Neutral	300	30.0	351	35.1	(1)
	Disagree	465	46.5	390	39.0	5.83*
3. Employers have a right to monitor the content of employees' private social media sites if they use a work computer during work time.	Agree	446	44.6	423	42.3	
	Neutral	248	24.8	260	26.0	(1)
	Disagree	306	30.6	317	31.7	.706
4. Employees have a right to engage with others outside the workplace using private social networking sites during work time.	Agree	240	24.0	216	21.6	
	Neutral	320	32.0	365	36.5	(1)
	Disagree	440	44.0	419	41.9	..237

[1] * indicates $p < .05$. 2Agree/Strongly Agree and Disagree/Strongly Disagree categories were collapsed in this table. 3Chi² statistics listed here exclude the 'neutral' category of responses, and only compare across only 'agree' and 'disagree' categories.

Table 9. Employees' beliefs regarding reasonable work time spent on personal online activities.

	Australia		United Kingdom		Total	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Less than 5 minutes	292	29.2	301	30.1	593	29.7
5 - 30 mins	490	49.0	408	40.8	898	44.9
31 - 60 mins	105	10.5	146	14.6	251	12.6
1 to 2 hours	31	3.1	41	4.1	72	3.6
More than 2 hours	10	1.0	19	1.9	29	1.5
I don't know	72	7.2	85	8.5	157	7.9

Figure 1. Contested terrain of online dissent (adapted from McDonald and Thompson, 2016).

Employer terrain		Employee terrain
Critical online comments		
Promoting a positive brand image and protecting *reputation*	Communicating *voice* and authentic work experiences outside the workplace	
Private use of social media		
Regulation of time and monitoring and directing workforce behaviour	*Autonomy* in engaging outside the workplace	