

Anonymous Bloggers and Organizational Coping Strategies

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Abstract:

Workbloggers – employees who write online diaries about their work -- are often simultaneously productive workers and savage critics of the corporate cultures in which they toil. Blogging about one's work life is a way of maintaining an emotional and intellectual distance between one's private and work selves, and new corporate management theories and their resultant jargon provide rich material for writers of a satirical bent.

The collision of personal, political, and corporate space resulting from the phenomenon of workblogging has led to several high profile “fired blogger” cases and negative publicity that have sent human resources and management professionals scrambling for solutions. Companies have attempted to stifle workblogging by increasing surveillance, developing blogging policies that discourage the practice, but this strategy conflicts ideologically with corporate cultures based on self-management and informal social exchange.

Several companies are experimenting with an alternate strategy -- “corporate blogging” – creating policies that embrace employee bloggers, encouraging them to reveal their identities and blog openly about work. However, anonymous bloggers have refused to be co-opted, responding with renewed commitment to their practice, maintaining a global critical dialogue about the labor process that transcends individualized resistance and contains the potential for an organized and vocal movement.

(199 words)

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Introduction

Ever since workblogs – online diaries about work -- entered the mainstream in 2002, bloggers' rights have been hotly contested, and the fight for blogger freedoms has raised labor and civil rights issues that go far beyond the act of blogging itself. High profile fired blogger cases have helped to shape the debate and have led to discussion about free speech in the workplace, the right of workers to organize, employees' freedom to do what they like when off-duty, and the encroachment of work into personal space.

This debate has placed management in an uncomfortable position – those employers who have disciplined or fired bloggers in order to remove what they perceive as a potential threat to their company have been subject to hydra-like retaliation from the blogging community. For business as a whole, the media focus on fired workbloggers has created bad publicity, drawing attention to the economic vulnerability of workers and revealing cracks in a corporate ideology that promises unproblematic self-actualization through the labor process.

Anonymous workbloggers make fun of management buzzwords, celebrate time-wasting on the job, and express a lack of motivation and an underlying conviction that their labor is meaningless. Their writings mirror the claims of a critical sociological literature that includes the work of Arlie Hochschild (1997) and Andrew Ross (2002), which exposes the insidious consequences of corporate culture in terms of time-scarcity and self-exploitation. As an act of ironic distancing from one's job, anonymous workblogging demonstrates the complex navigation of organizational self outlined by Gideon Kunda (1993), where workers use dramatization and irony to resist colonization of their private thoughts and emotions by the company.

Aware of the ideological disconnect presented by anonymous workbloggers, savvy corporations have begun to embrace blogging, promoting employer-sanctioned blogs and open discourse between workers and their supervisors as the way forward. However, the energetic pursuit of anonymizing strategies and legal protections on the part of the blogging community indicates that bloggers continue to see a conflict between company interests and their creative freedom. The highly networked, Internet-based nature of the blogosphere¹ affords employees the opportunity to transcend organizational boundaries, form alliances, and connect with traditional media in ways that go beyond the individualized and easily contained resistance demonstrated by Kunda, leading potentially to organized demands for social change.

A Fired Blogger: Dooce.com

In February 2002, Los Angeles-based web designer Heather B. Hamilton was fired from her job because of comments posted on her blog, Dooce (<http://www.dooce.com>). She had not mentioned the company by name and had concealed her identity, using only the pseudonym “Dooce,” but someone emailed top executives at the company informing them that she was writing about the company on her blog and she was fired shortly after. The firing of Dooce became an instant hot topic in the blogging community and she was flooded with emails from her readers. The press picked up on the issue and before long the term “dooiced,” to be fired from one’s job because of one’s blog, had become part of the blogging lexicon.

Dooce’s blog was notable because it was extremely well-written, irreverent, and funny. Dooce’s postings in 2002 were varied but many described her experiences in the workplace, offering vivid and scathing caricatures of her colleagues. In “The Proper Way to Hate a Job” (Hamilton 2002), she counseled readers on “successfully avoiding any work related to your

¹ A collective noun commonly used to describe all the blogs in existence.

actual job,” suggesting that readers spend the afternoon conducting, “seemingly academic experiments with bandwidth by seeing how many simultaneous downloads of ‘Get Ur Freak On’ your CPU can handle.” At other times her portraits of colleagues were cleverly evocative, as in this description of her boss entitled “Intimidation”: “When she talks with her hands she looks like she’s molesting the air around her, sticking her fingers in holes and around forbidden curves. Often the air around her is the air around me, and my air doesn’t appreciate it.” (Hamilton 2002). Dooce’s posts were littered with cynical references to team meetings and Powerpoint presentations, making fun of corporate buzzwords like “consumerizing,” “creative shaping,” and “expandable flow linkage,” and demonstrating contempt for the company’s cultural norms and its butchery of the English language.

As a well-paid employee of a high-tech company that had embraced contemporary management thinking, Dooce’s comments were emerging from a workplace that afforded workers a significant degree of freedom to manage their time and set their own schedules, and her writing pointed to the exploitative and frustrating aspects of a boundaryless labor process. Yet prior to the firing, Dooce was also in good standing at the company and was far from being perceived as a disgruntled worker in the eyes of her supervisor. As well as providing a safe place to vent about interpersonal conflicts, Dooce’s blog gave her a way of distancing herself from those aspects of her job that she could not reconcile with her own value system, helping her to maintain an organizational self that could perform well on the job without total embrace of the company’s culture.

As Gideon Kunda (1993) has shown, workers respond to the new emphasis on employee participation in a strong corporate culture in diverse ways, using irony, humor, and dramatic metaphors to negotiate an "organizational self" that meets the demands of the job while

maintaining some distance from the company's claims on their private resources and emotional lives. As such, "The organizational self becomes an active and artful construction, a performance, a tightrope walk, a balancing act of organizational reality claims, fluctuating between contradictory modes of relating to the organization and always threatened with the threat of burnout, or the exposure of its own illusions" (p. 216).

Dooce's blog is in one sense an example of the kind of individualized role-distancing described by Kunda. If it had remained obscure and undiscovered, it might have exerted what Jean-Louis Barsoux (1993) has called a "safety valve" effect on her participation in the organization. However, the public nature of her blog and the media attention that her firing generated, suggests an altogether more explosive ideological disconnect, and represents a more threatening situation that goes beyond the type of self-contained and largely innocuous employee behavior analyzed by Kunda.

Fired Bloggers, the Unions, and the Media

Dooce's firing was the first of many highly publicized blogging cases between 2002 and 2005 that caught the attention of the media, drawing attention to labor issues and demonstrating the reach that could be commanded by individual employees. In January 2005, Joe Gordon was fired from the Edinburgh branch of Waterstone's bookstore for his satirical blog, the The Woolamaloo Gazette (<http://www.woolamaloo.org.uk>), becoming the first person in the UK to be fired for blogging. Gordon, a senior bookseller in the store, had called the company "Bastardstone's," nicknamed his "sandal-wearing" boss as "Evil Boss," and called him a "cheeky smegger" for asking him to work on a bank holiday (Gordon 2004).

Quickly picking up on the situation surrounding Gordon's firing, The Guardian newspaper defended Gordon and questioned the company's actions. Noting that the name

Woolamaloo is derived from Monty Python's fictional "University of Woolloomooloo," the paper conjured the ideal of healthy British irreverence against its institutions and authority figures. The Guardian article highlighted the fact that Waterstone's, which had carried out a 2001 advertising campaign that featured burned writings by Hitler and Pol Pot, had failed to live up to its PR image as a bastion of free speech (Barkham 2005).

While in the media spotlight, Gordon (2005) wrote passionately about the help he had received from his union and linked this to his working class ancestry, writing in a post entitled "United We Stand," "previous generations of our family were miners and would never forgive me for not advocating unions." Gordon used his situation as a platform from which to call for greater labor protections, creating embarrassment for Waterstone's, which had situated itself as a progressive, enlightened company. Gordon's situation rapidly became a global conversation, with resistance emanating from a distributed group rather than from an isolated individual.

Technology Policies With Teeth: Employers Respond to Bloggers

In reacting to the blogging phenomenon, employers have followed a learning curve that mirrors wider developments in workplace culture and corporate ideology. There has been an increased demand for surveillance of employee computer use and efforts to establish written guidelines to discourage anonymous blogging about work. But some companies are also pursuing an alternate strategy -- a cautious corporate embrace of blogging, with some firms going as far as encouraging their employees to blog under the banner of openness and transparency.

Firms are stepping up monitoring of Internet use amid calls from technological management consultants such as the ePolicy Institute's Nancy Flynn to use technological surveillance tools to "battle people problems" (AMA 2005). According to the 2005 Electronic

Monitoring and Surveillance Survey conducted by the American Management Association and the ePolicy Institute (2005), "companies increasingly are putting teeth into their technology policies," with 26% firing workers for misusing the Internet and 76% monitoring workers' website connections. Up-to-date statistics for the UK are not available but earlier studies indicate similar trends (ACAS 2004).

In addition to technical solutions, firms are also being pressured to institute blogging policies that add to existing policies on Internet and email use. The AMA survey reports that 89% of firms inform employees that their Web usage is being tracked but that only 20% had policies on operating personal blogs on company time. Law experts argue that having a policy in place can protect an employer from appearing heavy-handed. In February 2005, UK employment law firm Cobbetts (2005) advised employers, "failure to have such a policy in place may result in claims that sanctions imposed are too draconian and may lay an employer open to claims in the employment tribunal."

A Tentative Embrace: Corporate Blogging

While surveillance and guidelines restricting or banning blogging can seem like simple solutions, big problems arise when these policies clash ideologically with management strategies that are based on building trust and openness among staff and supervisors, and nurturing self-motivation rather than closely supervising workers. Companies increasingly claim to honor workers' ability to set their own work schedule, and social activity that blurs the boundaries between work and play have long been tolerated in many white collar workplaces (Hochschild 1997; Ross 2002; Bunting 2005). A corporate policy that curbs freedoms can lower employee morale and threaten to burst the ideological bubble of the caring, humane workplace.

The past months have seen the emergence of an alternate corporate strategy that is in some ways a tacit acknowledgement of the ideological limitation of workplace policies that result in high profile fired bloggers. This new strategy has been promoted by David Sifry, Founder and CEO of the influential company Technorati, which monitors trends in the blogosphere and advises business of commercial opportunities. In October 2004, Sifry announced in his blog, "there is still a tremendous opportunity for forward-thinking companies and management to have a significant positive impact on their public perception by encouraging an enlightened blogging policy, encouraging openness both within and outside of the organization"(Sifry 2004). Sifry announced that forward-thinking companies such as Sun Microsystems were encouraging their workers to have personal blogs, while other firms, including Boeing and General Motors, were setting up corporate blogs where they invite employees to post authoritatively on new developments and products. This news has marked a new corporate embrace of blogging, with firms competing to adopt these "enlightened" strategies that are in line with the latest management thinking.

In this spirit of open embrace of employee blogging, several companies, including IBM and Yahoo, have encouraged public posting and discussion of their blogging policies, taking a high profile stance on the issue. Writing in May 2005, IBM employee and blogger James Snell vaunted IBM's policy as a triumph against anonymous blogging, noting the company's full endorsement of IBM bloggers and its full involvement of employees in devising and formalizing the policy:

IBM today is publishing an announcement on its Intranet site encouraging all 320,000+ employees world wide to consider engaging actively in the practice of "blogging"... The core principles -- written by IBM bloggers over a period of ten

days using an internal wiki -- are designed to guide IBMers as they figure out what they're going to blog about so they don't end up like certain notable ex-employees of certain notable other companies. (Snell 2005)

Snell scornfully dismisses as “crap,” a CNN article offering advice on anonymous workblogging, and reminds IBMers, “this isn't a policy that IBM is imposing upon us -- it is a commitment that we all have entered into together.” The guidelines themselves emphasize IBM’s corporate values of “open exchange and learning” and “trust and personal responsibility in all relationships,” and encourage IBM bloggers to identify themselves and their role in the company. Company-hosted blogs are to be written in a way that “adds value” to the company, and, while the guidelines indicate that what employees do outside of work is their own business, they are cautioned that, “activities in or outside of work that affect your IBM job performance, the performance of others, or IBM's business interests are a proper focus for company policy” (Snell 2005).

Anonymous Blogging Continues

Corporate blogging has been received skeptically by many in the blogging community and the entry of corporations is seen as antithetical to the blogosphere's not-for-profit ethos. In the Daily Telegraph, James Hall (2005) captured this reaction commenting that, "The very point of blogs is that they are open and honest. But how can blogs that have been sanctioned by a company be objective, wary bloggers ask." Amid proposals that employees should gain permission from their employer before starting their blog, The Guardian's Patrick Butler (2005) argued that employer-sanctioned workblogs by definition lack a satirical edge that makes them so capable of revealing truths and perspectives that cannot be gained elsewhere.

2005 has seen a surge in management seminars and conferences aimed at providing techniques in which companies can turn blogging from a threat into an opportunity, but those

who are hoping to profit from the blogosphere continue to tread carefully, not wishing to repeat mistakes such as the "Raging Cow" episode where trendy young bloggers were recruited to blog about a new Dr Pepper/Seven-Up-owned drink, resulting in accusations of underhand practice and a boycott of the drink by annoyed bloggers. The mainstream media has continued to air concerns that an employer-sanctioned blog is no substitute for one written in complete freedom. As Jeremy Blachman who was 'outed' in December 2004 as the author of very popular blog Anonymous Lawyer argued in a recent New York Times Op-Ed column:

"...now that everyone can publish online, we can get these incredible glimpses into worlds we might otherwise never get to see. People across the world can share stories, commiserate and connect with each other. Potential employees can see beyond the marketing pitches." (2005, p. 19)

The promotion of corporate blogging by David Sifry, James Snell, and other supporters, has been met by a counter-thrust from non-profit organizations and individual bloggers devoted to anonymous blogging. In April 2005, The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF, <http://www.eff.org>), a US-based nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting Internet freedoms, published its guide, "How to Blog Safely about Work or Anything Else" which clearly states EFF's support for anonymous blogging and provides concrete advice on how workers can continue to blog without revealing their identity.

The EFF guide describes blogs as "personal telephone calls crossed with newspapers," and counsels bloggers not to give away telling details about their workplace, as well as strongly advising against blogging while at work due to the high probability of being detected. It also outlines anonymizing technologies and services, such as Tor, Invisiblog, and Anonymous

Surfing software, which conceal the IP address of a computer, potentially helping bloggers to elude surveillance efforts.

EFF has also issued popular FAQs that explain bloggers' legal rights, reminding non-unionized US employees that in most states they are hired "at will," a status that affords workers very few protections from being fired at the employer's whim. The Labor Law FAQ (2005) informs US-based bloggers that, under the First Amendment, they cannot be fired for talking about unionizing or (so long as they notify the appropriate regulatory body first) for whistle blowing, and it explains the protected category of speech called "concerted speech," where two or more people may legally blog about their working conditions, such as the pay scale or vacation policy without fear of retaliation.

By reminding employees of their at-will status and their right to organize, EFF is reaffirming the role of union in protecting workers' rights and reinvigorating labor questions that may previously have seemed irrelevant or anachronistic to many workers. Although EFF's guides are focused on US employment law, the organization's efforts toward protecting the right to anonymous and free speech on the Internet have generated heavy interest and support in the UK, highlighting the need for a similar organization specializing in UK issues and triggering an Internet campaign that led to the formation of the new UK-based Open Rights Group (<http://www.openrightsgroup.org>) in November 2005 (Doctorow 2005).

As well as supporting existing organizations, individual bloggers who want to protect the right to blog anonymously about work have responded by forming new coalitions and information nodes. San Francisco-based writer Curt Hopkins' posting "Statistics on Fired Bloggers," on his blog [Morpheme Tales](http://morphemetales.blogspot.com) (<http://morphemetales.blogspot.com>), which invites readers to provide updates and corrections, has become a focal point for collecting information

on people around the world who have lost their jobs because of blogging. Another blogger-organized focal point is the [Anonymous Work Blogs Blogging](http://anonworkblogs.blogspot.com) (<http://anonworkblogs.blogspot.com>), which lists links to anonymous blogs about work and encourages each person listed to place a link from their blog to the next person in the ring.

Throughout the blogosphere, many bloggers have posted their own individual reactions and manifestos related to the firing of anonymous workbloggers and other related blogging controversies, often linking to or commenting on similar postings on each others' blogs, and creating a global dialogue that spreads news about and reactions to the latest developments. While this dialogue encompasses many opposing viewpoints, it also nurtures a sense of community, however heterogeneous and disparate, that elevates employee concerns above the individual level and creates the potential for exchange and organization among those who support anonymous blogging.

Caution and Renewed Commitment: Anonymous Bloggers Cover Their Tracks

For those members of the blogging community who write irreverently or critically about their work, it has been difficult to avoid the warnings and cautionary tales about fired bloggers and some have responded to the warnings by stepping back and reevaluating their practice. Harold Handsome², a blogger in the north of England, describes how he has reacted to the new warnings with a mix of caution and renewed commitment:

One thing I don't write about now, although I used to, is my work. I had written a series of posts, starting out quite harmless, but ending up a lot more risky- there was one all about racist remarks made by a colleague, one comparing a visiting VIP visitor from company HQ to a particularly self-important Roman Emperor, and

² Name changed to protect this blogger's identity

another about my unwillingness to take on a move to another team because, among other things, it sounded a bit too much like hard work and I would have less time to devote to the blog. I started to worry about being found out (it would at that time have only taken a Google search for my name) so one day took them all down. But those stories are all just in hibernation really and the day will come when they reappear in some untraceable online place- I even have the title of my new blog all worked out. (Personal Interview, November 11, 2005)

Harold has been alarmed at the prospect that blogging might threaten his livelihood but he hasn't given up hope of continuing once he has covered his tracks better.

Eluding detection based on the content of their blog is an ongoing challenge for anonymous workbloggers. The Google search engine added blog searchability in September 2005 (Sifry 2005), making it increasingly difficult for bloggers to hide in obscurity. Posting content that does not reveal too much of a blogger's identity is a craft that demands constant alertness and artistry, especially for writers devoted to conveying realistic dialogue and events from their daily lives. Many bloggers use fictionalizing techniques that remove their anecdotes and stories from the actual events that inspired them. UK blogger, Tim³, who writes [A Free Man in Preston](http://afreemaninpreston.blogspot.com) (<http://afreemaninpreston.blogspot.com>), refers to this practice as using his "blogger's license" to "exaggerate here, caricature there, mess about with time frames when it suits me" (Tim 2005), leaving readers guessing about how much is truth and how much is conjured from Tim's rich imagination, and reminding his audience that anything they read on his blog may be pure fantasy. Carefully covering his tracks, Tim is one of many anonymous bloggers who are

³ the alias this anonymous blogger uses in his postings.

committed to continuing to blog anonymously and whose art has perhaps gained a certain caché from the corporate blogging phenomenon with which it exists in stark contrast.

Conclusion

Critics of corporate culture such as Arlie Hochschild (1997), Andrew Ross (2002) and, in the UK, Madeleine Bunting (2005), have argued that the colonization of workers' emotions and creative impulses in the service of salaried time has led to overwork, time-scarcity, and neglected families and communities. Looking at workers in a high tech environment who are simultaneously seduced by the company culture yet wary of its encroachment into their private space, Gideon Kunda has added an important and subtle dimension to this analysis, focusing on how workers negotiate their organizational identity, while simultaneously maintaining some distance from their role and resisting the culture of the organization.

Anonymous blogging, which allows workers to vent their frustrations and distance themselves from corporate culture using highly fictionalized identities, represents, on the one hand, a form of role-distancing that enables workers to accommodate value differences and express feelings of alienation without disrupting their job performance. However, as recent high-profile workblogging controversies have illustrated, anonymous blogging is a potentially disruptive, highly networked phenomenon that makes use of rapidly evolving Internet technologies to create new opportunities for dialogue and action.

Efforts to suppress anonymous blogging by increasing surveillance and discouraging the practice through written policies have encountered ideological limitations, since they clash with corporate culture based on employee freedom and self-management. However, these limitations have been surmounted by a powerful new corporate strategy of embracing blogging as an

integral aspect of the corporate culture and encouraging employees to blog openly and candidly about their work.

Although this “corporate blogging” strategy has garnered vocal support from prominent employees of influential organizations and has been hailed as a moral victory over anonymous blogging, employer-sanctioned blogs fails to accommodate the continued need for unfettered critical distancing from the labor process. Ultimately, the workblogging controversy has raised questions about whether negativity and irreverence can be tolerated in a new corporate culture that attempts to incorporate workers' whole selves into its organism. Blogs about work expose the fact that even good employees feel resentful at having their time colonized by the company, that they often find their work and the goals of the organization deeply meaningless or even troubling, that they do not trust that the company cares about them and see the threat of downsizing beneath the caring company jargon. Blogs lament the demise of union protections, and they cry out for health benefits and vacation time. Blogs say this message very loud and they start and maintain conversations on a global level that transcends organizational boundaries, going beyond the individualized resistance identified by Kunda.

In spite of the very real fear of losing their jobs because of publicly declaring their feelings, bloggers continue to write critically about their work, taking advantage of technological developments and employing creative subterfuge to protect their identity and building alliances that protect their legal rights. Whether the persistence of the anonymous blogger community represents a serious threat to corporate culture, or is instead perhaps more of an employee safety valve that actually promotes overall corporate health, is an evolving question that, like the Internet itself, will unfold quickly and in unexpected and dramatic ways in the coming years.

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