Intellectual Freedom, the Right to Free Inquiry, and Digital Privacy

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ABSTRACT

The extensive use of the internet and digital technology in the workplace, including universities, has transformed the work style of employees, faculty members, and students. On the one hand, it has helped employees communicate, coordinate, and collaborate on a 24/7 basis around the world, which in turn has improved productivity and work performance. However, on the other hand, it has made employees vulnerable to monitoring and invasion of privacy. Many faculty members and students feel that surveillance and computer monitoring are compromising their intellectual freedom, the right to free inquiry, and digital privacy. This study addresses how the use of computer monitoring affects the morale and performance of faculty members and students for their intellectual and free inquiry. The study uses the survey method to interview professors and students to analyze their responses with regards to monitoring their online activities.

KEYWORDS

Academic Freedom, Computer Monitoring, Digital Privacy, Free Inquiry, Intellectual Freedom, Surveillance

INTRODUCTION

Recent advances in the Internet and digital technologies have made everyone be on a digital platform constantly for their daily activities. In the last few years, the use of a myriad of social communications platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, has further influenced the work style of individuals. Universities have always been at the forefront of the use of new technologies. Faculty members are encouraged to use these platforms, not only to teach and engage students on how to use these platforms but also to explore new technology-based learning platforms. Students are assigned to research their projects using the Internet and online libraries. As a result, universities are offering more and more online learning opportunities and open educational resources to reduce costs of course delivery, improve instructional material, and also provide better teaching methods. Many universities worldwide have started offering online courses and programs in environments such as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), and edX. Coursera[1] has already been utilized globally by students to earn their degrees online. Open educational resources have gained popularity among students and faculty members because those resources have helped to reduce the high costs of traditional education such as the cost of purchasing textbooks and the cost of transportation.

Online education has undeniable advantages of creating time and place utilities (flexibility and accessibility) in addition to lower cost. However, online education has also its drawbacks. Among frequently discussed limitations of online education are:

1. Little of not face to face interaction

According to Mark Edmundson, online education creates a "monologue and not real dialogue" in the learning environment.

2. Online courses may create *more work for students* in terms of reading more assignments, or readings to improve their quality of education.
3. Online education is *for students who are self-discipline.* Students now more than before experiencing the "poverty of time" Only students with time management and organization skills are able to stay on top of the online requirement.
4. Finally, online education is *requiring self-direction.* Although, universities make student advising services available for online students, however, students pursuing an entire degree online have to be proactive in finding the information they need to be sure that they are taking the right classes for their degree plan .

With more and more faculty members and students using the Internet and open educational resources, universities are deploying systems and devices to monitor the network traffic and the use of computers. This practice of monitoring has caused concerns among many faculty members as well as students about others snooping into their computer activities, storage, and use of data collected through network security analysis. These researchers seek to foster a climate on campus free from arbitrary or capricious monitoring on the information they use or store on their computers. Many faculty members feel that surveillance and computer monitoring have been compromising their intellectual freedom, the right to free inquiry and digital privacy. There has been an ongoing debate on many campuses on how to define academic freedom in the age of the online world. A majority of the professors criticize the monitoring program for invading their privacy, intellectual freedom, and the right to free inquiry.

It is commonly known that corporations and other organizations often monitor the online behavior of their employees because they are concerned about employees' use of the Internet for their personal purposes. Although monitoring business employees may negatively affect their morale and productivity, employers have some legitimate reasons to monitor their employees at the workplace. For example, employers provide workplaces, pay for facilities like the Internet, and therefore, they expect these facilities to be used for the profitability of the business not for personal purposes or illegal acts (Gumbus A., 2006). It is estimated that at least 26 million Americans are electronically monitored in the workplace. Although management insists that they have the right to monitor their employees for security and other valid reasons, many researchers argue that such surveillance and monitoring violates the right to privacy and creates fear or anxiety, which in turn may hamper their research inquiry and scholarly productivity (Chalykoff J., 1989). However, universities are different kinds of organizations where researchers whether faculty members or students may get involved in researching sensitive topics, including terrorism and pornography. Should universities also follow the same tradition of snooping into the researchers' computer usage for their day-to-day activities? It is well known that sometimes security concerns trump privacy, but should it become the norm to monitor professors or students? The universities are struggling to make policies, which can balance security, privacy, intellectual freedom, and the right to free inquiry. Electronic workplace surveillance, or computer and network monitoring, is raising concerns about privacy and fairness among the academic community on university campuses (Alge, 2001).

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