


Chapter 11


The Algorithmic Gaze: Power, Surveillance, and Despotism in the Digital Workplace

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the ways that algorithmic technologies reconfigure workplace authority by changing how we think about surveillance, evaluation, and control in data-driven management practices. Drawing from and reconceptualising Foucault's Panopticon and Zuboff's Surveillance Capitalism, it contends that the algorithmic gaze creates an invisible governance system, where trust and autonomy are replaced by quantification. Through case studies in service, fintech, and logistics sectors, the analysis highlights how discourses of efficiency and performance sustainability legitimise digital despotism, bias, and workers self-monitoring. The chapter concludes with a framework for digital humanism, which articulates ethical, transparent, and participatory governance and management, which can restore human dignity and agency in algorithmically mediated labour.

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INTRODUCTION

Data-driven decision-making has driven major transformation in workplace management in the digital era. Originally envisioned with promises of flexibility and empowerment, there is now a strong move toward surveillance and control characterized by quantification and monitoring. The ongoing development of algorithms has created an overview of the workforce that monitors, evaluates and disciplines labourers via data infrastructure (Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020; Delfanti, 2021).

In addition to supporting managerial decision-making, algorithms shape the definitions of “performance,” “trust,” and “value.” This forms the basis of the digital empire: an ideology of algorithmic control occurring as part of the automation and data governance that exists within organizations (Zuboff, 2019; Katzenbach & Ulbricht, 2019). Digital empire differs from traditional authority in that digital control is enforced through a coded and quantified framework that appears neutral but actually imposes continuous discipline.

Traditionally, the judgments made by managers were informed by their relationships with employees, which built mutually trusting relations. Conversely, algorithmic governance transforms behaviours into metrics and monitors employees through dashboards and data-driven tools (Kellogg et al. 2020). This represents the current version of Foucault's (1977) “panoptic gaze” and the surveillance technique employed relies on clouded metrics producing self-regulatory behaviours through anticipatory compliance .

There is evidence indicating that employees are losing some degree of autonomy and experiencing heightened anxiety, decreased ability to be creative, etc., due to increasing numbers of organizations implementing precise, scalable methods of managing/monitoring performance (e.g., algorithmic management). For example, prior research on the effects of algorithmic management indicates that it has a negative impact on employee well-being and psychosocial stressors (Parent-Rocheleau & Parker, 2023). Data collected through surveillance capitalism involves using data as a resource for predicting behavior and controlling actions, rather than simply being a neutral source of information (Zuboff, 2019). Additionally, data is converted from labor to auditable, monetisable data streams (Sadowski, 2020).

Algorithmic systems are not ideologically neutral and instead hold cultural and managerial assumptions about what is considered to be efficient, competent performance (Suchman, 2020; Noble, 2018). For example, in measuring “engagement” through the use of Artificial Intelligence Tools (AI), Western behavioral norms are often imposed on people while non-Western and non-compulsive (neurodivergent) individuals are marginalised because of these norms (Ajunwa, 2020). In this chapter, I will label outcomes of this nature as digital sectionalism and digital favoritism

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