

Workers are doing it for themselves: Examining creative employee application of Web 2.0 communication technology

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Abstract

The paper should be of interest to academics, trade unionists, employers and governmental officials who have an interest in new forms of Web communication technology and how new Web communication technologies may affect the future direction of industrial relations. The main foci of the paper is Web 2.0, or the recent transformation of the World-Wide-Web to allow ordinary people to get involved in creating on-line content (e.g. blogs, wikis and social networking platforms), and, increasing evidence that non-organized workers are applying this new wave of communication technologies for work and employment-related ends. It is put forward that non-organized workers are progressively making more use of such technology as a means to develop their careers, take action against employers, and, as a mean to misbehave and survive work. The method applied to assess the proposed trends involves reviewing scholarly research, anecdotal accounts of worker activity from newspapers, and observations of Internet activity noted by the author of the paper. The conclusions suggest there is superficial, yet strong evidence to suggest workers are increasingly experimenting and being highly creative with Web 2.0 communication technology, for a range of work and employment-related ends. Due to the newness of the technology, however, the results generate far more unknowns than answers. Guidance for future research activities are summarised in the conclusions.

Key words: Web 2.0, employees, employment, worker, trends, web application

Introduction

Previous research on how employees pursue their employment-related interests have been, and quite rightly so, dominated by traditional industrial relations studies focused on collective bargaining, strikes, and trade union memberships, and, industrial sociological case study accounts of employee resistance and misbehaviour. In contrast, little scholarly attention has been given to the possibilities for employees pursuing similar interests through new forms of web communication technology (referred to in the paper as Web 2.0 communication technology). While it may be far too early to say whether or not the Internet presents a focal point, or even a true alternative to traditional means of interest expression, there is mounting evidence to suggest that employees are experimenting with an evolving domain for interest expression. The paper takes the view that we cannot pre-assume that this is a faddish phase for non-organized labour and far more research resources must be set aside and innovative methodologies applied to explore such activities in their own right.

The rise of Web 2.0

During the rapid growth of the Internet in the mid-1990s the main application of the World Wide Web (WWW), aside from email, was to provide users with information. At this time WWW information provision was monopolised by a small range of information providers – private and not-for-profit organizations marketing/selling their products and services through computer interfacing, news organizations experimenting with ‘new media’, governments providing information on a whole manner of subjects, and, a minority of users who possessed rare technical skills and know-how producing private homepages. Large amounts of primary information continues to be produced and communicated in such a fashion, but in more recent years, information available from the WWW is increasingly provided by people (later discussed more specifically in terms of employees), as new Web applications emerge that require very little or no programming skills.

The most recent noteworthy transformation of the WWW is commonly referred to as ‘Web 2.0’, a transformation so profound it marked the unprecedented ability of ordinary users to get more involved in creating on-line content (Kolbitsch and Maurer, 2006; Biever, 2006). The term Web 2.0 emerged around two years ago and is yet to be defined in a scholarly sense. However, ‘web gurus’, such as Tim O’Reilly, associate Web 2.0 with new developments that emerged after the so-called dot-com-collapse at the turn of the twenty-

first century, and as such, is commonly associated with a wide variety of emergent Internet applications that includes, but is not exclusive to, blogs (weblogs), wikis, message boards and chat rooms, file sharing, Podcasting, instant messenger, really simple syndication, and social networking¹ (for an overview and discussion of these technologies see, e.g. Kolbitsch and Maurer, 2006). The technical detail to Web 2.0 is complex and probably bewildering to the many, yet is perhaps not so relevant to the social realm of Internet application. In social terms, however, Web 2.0 is about individuals and groups, initially confined to consumers of information from web pages of already established organizations, increasingly using the WWW as a platform to generate web-content that has proven to be the basis of a new medium for social networking, information sharing and political activity. General examples of such activity includes making a contribution to Wikipedia, up-loading personal short videos to YouTube, creating podcasts available through iTunes, making available personal photographs through Flickr, and personally written narratives on any manner of subjects via blogging platforms, such as Blogger, TypePad or WordPress, and, social networking platforms, such as MySpace, Facebook and Bebo. In other words, instead of the WWW being a source of similar styled information to that found through mediums such as television, radio, newspapers and compact discs, Web 2.0 has allowed ordinary people, exploring matters that are very close to them, to become a primary dynamic of the Internet (Coté and Pybus, 2007).

Unlike in the USA, the growth of ordinary British individuals specifically applying Web 2.0 communication technology has until recently gone unrecorded, even governmental social surveys of broader Internet application miss out on such increasingly important detail. For instance, despite evidence to suggest social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook and Bebo have around 14 million members in the UK alone (Brockett, 2007), the latest statistics provided by National Statistics Online (2007) concerning Internet access do not list social networking or blogging in their list of Internet activities by adults. The newness and widespread uptake of Web 2.0 application, however, did not escape the latest Oxford Internet Institute Survey (OxIS) 2007 (Dutton and Helpser, 2007). Indeed, it is estimated that 12 per cent of all Internet users keep a blog and as many as 15 per cent of those employed have created an on-line profile. Further employment-related dimensions of OxIS

¹ This is not to say that such technologies have only emerged in the past few years. On the contrary, many of the technologies listed have existed for more than ten years. However, widespread adoption of such technologies and widespread knowledge and concern of their existence has only become apparent in the past few years.

2007 outline how 17 per cent of employees who use social networking sites believe interaction of this kind has greatly increased or somewhat increased contact they have with people of the same profession. It is likely that the great majority of activity that goes on between users of social networking and blogging platforms involves matters unrelated to work and employment. However, as Derek Blackadder, an organizing representative for the Canadian Union of Public Employees' Ontario Region and senior Canadian correspondent for the international labour website called LabourStart believes, there is growing anecdotal evidence that social networking platforms are being used for employment-related purposes:

Workers who share a common employer, occupation, union or issues like health and safety concerns, are interacting on Facebook, creating networks, sharing insights and technical tips, venting, co-ordinating actions, and just generally doing good and useful things (Blackadder, 2007).

Research by Richards (2007) also found evidence of a growing trend of already organized and non-organized workers keeping and reading blogs of a similar work-related nature. The main reasons to be involved in such activity centred on inspiration from popular bloggers who write about work on a regular basis, frustrations at work and wanting to join in with established work blogging communities.

Research objectives

The basis of the paper, therefore, is to suggest that Web 2.0 communication technology has opened up a wide range of opportunities that serve the ends of non-organized employees. In other words, is it the case that Web 2.0 communication technology is allowing employees to do more for themselves in terms of defending and furthering their employment-related interests? Should trade unions, governments, employer organizations and professional associations be concerned about the activity and information available through such mediums? Is, ultimately, employee application of Web 2.0 communication technology set to become a primary dynamic in industrial relations? Beginning to answer these questions is problematic as there is currently only fragmented and perhaps contrasting research on the subject of how, why and to what effect employees are adapting communication tools associated with Web 2.0, outwith traditional activities, for their own

ends². Very recent press reports currently represent a valuable resource in this regard due to the ability of such information providers to recount WWW activity much quicker than scholarly journals. Researcher observations of and enquiries into WWW activity not noted by scholarly journals or the media are also further options to compliment written and formally accessible resources. The purpose of the current research, therefore, is to review such literatures and observations as a means to assess current developments in employee and worker application of Web 2.0 communication technology, and where appropriate, identify opportunities for future research activity. Themes pre-identified by the author of the current research include the advantages that Web 2.0 brings for employees seeking to develop in their current jobs/careers and includes job search-related activities, how employees self-organize around such mediums, particularly when traditional trade union channels are seen as less favourable options or not immediately available, and, how non-organized employees are increasingly applying Web 2.0 communication technologies as a forum for e-misbehaviour, or a means to let off some of the pressures of work without challenging structures of power. A final sub-section considers how employers have so far responded to the opportunities and threats of Web 2.0 communication technology, as discussed in the three previous sub-sections. There follows a discussion of the findings and a proposal for future research on the subject of Web 2.0, work and employment.

Web 2.0, work and employment

In this section evidence is produced and reviewed in accordance with what appear to be the main trends in employee and worker application of Web 2.0 communication technology, for work and employment-related ends. The categories are not exclusive and some commonality exists between them. It is meant to be an exercise in giving examples, and reviewing the examples, of how Web 2.0 technology is explored and exploited by employees, and is not meant to be an exhaustive account of its use. Indeed, such is the current growth, newness and media interest in Web 2.0 technology, creative examples of its application by employees emerge in the popular press on an almost ongoing basis, with many uses of Web 2.0 still to gain wider acknowledgement. There may even be a backlog

² There is also an emerging body of literature that considers how organizations are expecting their employees to use Web 2.0 communication technology for the express benefit of the organization, e.g. Brown et al, 2007; Efimova and Grudin, 2007, which is to a certain extent later in the current research.

of scholarly research on Web 2.0, work and employment soon to emerge in the public domain.

Web 2.0, career development and job search

In essence, applying the WWW in this respect is about employees using Web 2.0-related communication technology to seek perfect information about employers and careers. As such, on-line social networking, chat rooms or any web-site primarily driven by user contributions, for example, may help somewhat with that problem. Indeed, as Fountain (2005) proposes, there are strong indications that the WWW is a new space through which job information can flow. Clear scholarly evidence that points towards channels not conceived by formal organizations and corporations appear minimal. In one instance, however, a survey of the HR profession conducted by IRS Employment Review (Suff, 2004) indicated that nearly 60 per cent of HR professionals use 'online chat' to manage their ongoing career and knowledge management. At an observational level, there has been a number of social networking sites set up by private companies and individuals not seeking profit that have been specifically designed to fulfil part of the career development needs of individuals. For instance, *Academici*, used by several thousand academics from a wide-range of disciplines throughout the world, claims to provide a "web-based resource environment in which knowledge workers can interact, collaborate, transfer knowledge and conduct commerce with each other, with commercial and governmental organizations³". In this instance, the organizers provide the tools to communicate; yet it is the members who create the content⁴. In slight contrast, a more modest venture by a small number of college professors in the USA, called *AcademicBlogs*, has lead to the creation of a freely modifiable wiki where users can post weblinks to interesting resources, notify others of academics who blog about their research interests, or upload other forms of content that may be useful to academic bloggers and academics more generally.

Further studies that touch on the use of Web 2.0 forms of communication technology by employees in this manner are rare, but where they exist, prove to be quite insightful. For example, Matzat's (2004) research investigated the role of Internet discussion groups in informal communication between academics. The findings suggest that communicating in this manner can fulfil some communication needs and allows colleagues to be more aware

³ See <http://www.academici.net/> for more details

of each others output – such as researchers finding it easier to communicate web-links to both published and unpublished research materials. However, Matzat also observed that networks of this kind were unstable in most cases and rather than lead to new and long-term collaborative projects, such exchanges are often limited to the passing on of information. Bryen (2006), moreover, considered job-related on-line social networking, but in this case confined the parameters of her research to employees who are isolated in their daily duties. The findings from the research clearly portrays Web 2.0 communication technology as a potential means to overcome isolation and other such difficulties, as it is stated that technologies of that kind can help reduce social isolation and social networks for those who find travel and face-to-face contact difficult. What is more, the research subjects reported further positives in that the new and evolving technology allows isolated workers and employees to break out of their physical limitations and increase work, education and recreational opportunities. Such findings echo the work of Gely and Bierman (2006) who believe blogging about work can potentially play a part in ameliorating the increasing social isolation of American workers. Having said that, Bryen (2006) points out that successful on-line networking still requires the employee to have good social skills.

There are several research articles that consider why and how employees use the WWW for job searches in a traditional sense (e.g. Fountain, 2005; Jansen et al, 2005; Miller and McDaniels, 2001), however, in terms of employees seeking out information on prospective employers, using Web 2.0 communication technology independent of traditional employment agencies, appears, as of yet, not to have stimulated much scholarly interest. What has emerged so far is an indication that there is a small yet growing trend of employees, especially those yet to start or are at the beginning of careers, consulting work blogs as a means to research the realities of everyday careers, such as reading about the day-to-day duties of police officers, school teachers, or ambulance drivers (Richards, 2007). Further observations of WWW activity, moreover, points to the sharing of inside knowledge of corporations and employers through websites such as JobVent⁵ – set up by one individual after an unhappy employment-related experience. A message from the JobVent homepage outlines its main objectives:

⁴ LinkedIn and Vault are more generic versions of Academici and focused on a wider level of social networking and a general dissemination of career details.

⁵ In the past year there have been more than 12,000 reviews submitted to JobVent that cover over 3200 different companies worldwide. JobVent also has nearly 1,100 registered users and gets tens of thousands of hits everyday (Source: Personal email from co-ordinator of JobVent – Craig Spitzkoff – to researcher).

JobVent is the web site for anyone who has ever said 'I hate my job', or 'I love my job'.
JobVent is the web site for people who are about to start a new job, and want to see what other people think of working there.

If you've got anything to say about your job, post it on this web site. Try to keep vulgarities to a minimum. DO NOT call people out by name. Speak your mind, but please, do it tactfully.

All postings on this site are anonymous, and will remain that way. So start writing reviews (there's nothing to worry about)!⁶.

The website operates on the basis that current or past employees of any company can rate their employer on-line and this information becomes freely available to others and can also be accessible through generic web search engines. The contributor grades their employer based on the following criteria: pay, respect, benefits, job security, work life balance, career potential, location, co-worker competence, and, work environment. The review criterion goes from awarding plus five marks for excellent experience through to minus five for a very poor experience. The marks are then averaged out as multiple reviews are made and on the homepage the top ten companies with the highest positive marks are displayed alongside the top ten companies with the most negative marks. The review process allows individual marks to be revisited by readers and it is here where lengthy personal marks can be digested too.

It certainly appears to be early days in assessing how employees apply Web 2.0 communication technology in terms of developing their careers and seeking out information on prospective careers or employers. The evidence presented suggests the manner by which the information is created and distributed represents a very new and creative way of achieving age-old objectives – gaining information about employers and raising the capacity of workers to bargain with employers at the start of employment. What is certainly new and appears to warrant further research, involves a kind of WWW activity where small groups of individuals, acting in a co-operative manner, without the coercive forces typically associated with employment, producing information for other like minded individual to consult. Questions can and should be raised about the value and credibility of such forums

⁶ See <http://www.jobvent.com>

of information and debate, yet it would be foolish to assume that all the information provided in this manner has no credibility.

Web 2.0 and e-activism

There is a reasonable expanse of research on the subject of increased and diverse trade union application of the Internet (e.g. see Bjorkman and Huzzard, 2005; Freeman, 2005; Martinez Lucio, 2003). However, the main aim and the scope of the current research is to discuss how employees pursue work and employment-related interests by applying Web 2.0 communication technology, yet act outwith traditional forms of organization. In this instance it is difficult to make a complete distinction between the two, as any informal political activity is likely to relate in some way to traditional modes of agency and activism. Having said that, there is some research that considers such activity, even if the activity is eventually analysed by the research author as either a threat or compliment to the activities of trade unions.

A particularly good example of such activity is a forum for corporate whistleblowers called Wikileaks – an ‘uncensorable Wikipedia for untraceable mass document leaking and analysis’ and a ‘place for journalists, truth tellers and everybody else...’⁷. As of mid-2007, Wikileaks has been in the receipt of over 1.2 million documents from dissident communities and anonymous sources⁸. A further example is the formation of a collectively written blog by employees of General Motors – the General Motors Workers Blog – the blog has many contributions from General Motors from all over the world, receives more than 70,000 hits per year and has had more than 30,000 unique visitors in the same time period⁹. The aim of the blog is summarised below:

...This Blog intends to be a powerful tool against the strategies of General Motors seeing employees only as an instrument to raise productivity and to cut costs. Here you can inform all interested people in the world what happens in your plant, on the shop floor, in the office and how GM treats its employees. And of course you can inform yourself what is going on in other GM plants and countries...¹⁰.

⁷ See <http://www.wikileaks.org/wiki/Wikileaks> for more details.

⁸ See <http://wikileaks.org/wiki/Wikileaks> for more details.

⁹ Source: Personal email from General Motors Workers Blog administrator to researcher.

¹⁰ See http://www.gmworkersblog.com/the_aim_of_the_blog for more details.

The blog is clearly helped along by input from the trade unions associated with General Motors, yet there is no compulsion to join a trade union as a pre-condition for making a contribution. Indeed, the only pre-condition for making a contribution is a simple registration process requiring no personal details. A more exclusive example is a blog entitled *Bullying of Academics in Higher Education*¹¹, which involves the written commentaries of three British academics apparently committed to highlighting hidden forms of bullying in higher education, through the WWW.

Few have written about non-organized employees applying Web 2.0 communication technology as a forum for e-activism. However, it would be reasonable to assume that the advantages presented to trade unions by Web 2.0 technology are similar to those who are not trade union members. Firstly, as Freeman (2005) suggests, social networking sites, blogs and wikis, for example, are commonly associated with what is called 'open source' programming, and are typically free to use. Open source programming is also typically available to the public without restrictions imposed by the designer, is often itself the result of a collaborative project, with the result being useful tools which can be adopted to suit different agendas, approaches and priorities. In other words, many have already sampled the use of open source programming in the case of blogs, message boards, and wikis, because of their simple-to-adapt formats, let alone the low cost information, communication and interaction they can also bring. A second advantage of communication technology is any range of contributors can continually add information and opinion, and in some cases, contributions can be edited. Such freedoms lead to the possibility of polyphonic organization to emerge (Carter et al, 2003) and interest group democracy is, hypothetically, more likely (Diamond and Freeman, 2002). In other words, there is the possibility for many opinions, not just of those who are the more articulate in the social domain of political activity, to be put forward and discussed, and in a much more open manner. A further advantage put forward by Carter et al (2003) is that organization of this kind could allow activists the opportunity to go above the heads of official groups and appeal to anyone who may be sympathetic to their cause – the case in point is the worldwide support generated by Liverpool Dockers who were not directly supported by their union in a major industrial dispute in the late 1990s. In short, what could emerge from the careful and creative use of such technologies is a forum for interest development that has the potential to span the world, and, has the potential to disrupt and shape the current industrial status quo

¹¹ See <http://bulliedacademics.blogspot.com/> for more details.

characterised by a range of alliances between trade unions, governments and employer associations. More importantly though, is the form of activity need not involve trade union input at any level.

Further reasons why e-activism related to work and employment has emerged may be dependent on a number of factors that relate to the country that the employees involved originate from. For instance, many industrial sectors in British industries are almost devoid of a trade union presence (Kersley et al, 2006) and, hypothetically at least, represent fertile territory for micro-interests groups to emerge and explore Web 2.0 communication technology, as a new weapon to address common work and employment-related concerns. What is more, British trade union memberships are lowest in the groups (i.e. trade union membership density is 10 per cent for 16 to 24 years compared to 35 per cent for those aged over 50 – Grainger and Crowther, 2006) most likely to use Web 2.0 communication technology (i.e. Internet application is 90 per cent for the 16 to 24 years age group compared to 59 per cent for those aged 55 to 64 years of age – ONS, 2007). Indeed, even where a trade union recognition deal exist, the trade union may be weak on day-to-day shopfloor matters, and as a consequence put pressure on shopfloor employees to take matters into their own hands. For instance, in 2004 a disgruntled employee who works for Wm Morrison (UK supermarket chain with an agreement with USDAW) set up a blog and on-line forum for front-line employees to discuss work-related matters, both of which attracted a great deal of contributors and media attention (e.g. see Fletcher, 2005). It may also be the case that many employees believe trade unions to be too constrained by current industrial relations law and the attraction of self-organization and the many strategies Web 2.0 opens up, may in the short-term at least, prove to be an attractive option. At the very least, employees (mainly the youngest of this group) are evidently applying Web 2.0 communication technology to discuss work and employment in a creative and dynamic manner, which may turn out to be a problem for trade unions in the future, yet broadly speaking cannot be seen as anything less than a good sign for those who are supportive of the labour movement.

The benefits of self-organization by way of Web 2.0 communication technology are apparent, although it is impossible to know how commonly they are used and whether they help alleviate the problems faced by both organized and non-organized employees. Indeed, it may be far too soon to say whether or not e-activism of this kind will become

more common in the future. Indications suggest more experimentation may take place before any generic Web 2.0 model of self-organization emerges, for other less creative employees to apply. Having said that, the ease and price of use, as well as the potential scope and quick momentum of such activities, particularly in terms of corporate whistleblowing, can only make such activities more attractive to the creative and disadvantaged, and in turn, attract attention from concerned employers (see later subsection). Currently, there is little evidence that scholars are taking notice of such activity, let alone researching its development. Without such interventions, in the form of either a social survey or in-depth case studies, activities of this kind are likely to remain invisible to the outside world and a struggling labour movement may fail to fully grasp new and innovative organizing and mobilizing activities.

Web 2.0 and e-misbehaviour

Unlike the case of e-activism, there appears to be no shortage of examples of employees applying Web 2.0 communication technology as a form of e-misbehaviour. Similar to e-activism and job search/career development, the main evidence for a rise of e-misbehaviour can only be gleaned from media reporting. What is meant by e-misbehaviour goes beyond the organizational definition that includes activities occurring within the workplace that 'should not happen' according to official rules, and, acts that contain an element of challenge to the dominant interests of the organization (Watson, 2003), to similar levels of mischief exhibited outwith the workplace, and in this case, in Cyberspace. This, in effect, rules out the direct relevance of a range of scholarly research papers that consider the increasingly common workplace phenomenon of cyberslacking or misappropriating the organization's information and communication technological systems (e.g. see Beard, 2002; Block, 2001; Lim, 2002; de Lara et al, 2006; Mahatanankoon et al, 2004; Taylor and Bain, 2003). What is meant by e-misbehaviour in this sense are employees using Web 2.0 communication technology as a form of light relief from the pressures of work and the cementing of useful friendship and support groups at work or across workplaces. Due to the input required of, for example blogging about work, and the likelihood of many employers blocking access to such WWW platforms, a further distinction is that activities of this kind, and the viewing of the activities, are likely to be conducted away from the premises of work. Such activity may be interpreted as a form of resistance, or possibly whistleblowing, yet the main intention of the act is probably to inform others of

the realities of work in a humorous fashion, or for the pure entertainment of employees who work under similar conditions of employment.

Currently, work blogging appears to be the most well known form of this type of e-misbehaviour, although it should be pointed out that mischief is only one interpretation of this activity (Richards, 2007). Indeed, there are several examples of employees losing their jobs due to writing about work in such a manner. This is despite the reality of work blogging rarely being anything more than employees making comments no more controversial than typically heard on work time. For example, Joe Gordon, a senior bookseller and employee of Waterstone's, lost his job in 2005 for expressing opinions of his employer via his personal blog – a company that sells books to many thousands of people. Gordon objected to his dismissal claiming he was doing nothing more than 'moaning' about his boss and his job. Work blogging has been sensationalised by a range of national newspapers over the past two to three years. In this domain work blogging has been likened to 'spilling the beans' (McClellan, 2004), 'a peek behind the corporate façade' (Chynoweth, 2005), or 'the truth about school life' (Wallace, 2007). Titles given to work blogs commonly reflect a mischievous motive or undertone, such as, The NHS Confessional, Don't Blame Me! I'm Just a Sales Assistant, and Call Center Purgatory. From another perspective, Schoneboom (2006a and 2006b) believes work blogging to be a new phenomenon that involves employees simultaneously being productive workers, yet reserving the time and energy to be savage critics of the corporate cultures in which they toil. Further research by Richards (2007) suggests a hidden dimension of work blogging involves employees finding new ways in which to survive work, as old ways lose their appeal, or are successfully restricted by employers. Despite the popularity of work blogging in terms of attracting individual readers, book deals¹² and media attention, it remains a relatively rare phenomenon. However, blogging about work and employment in a mischievous manner is believed to be an interstitial matter of both general adult blogging and social networking platforms¹³, yet, at present, there is no way of knowing for sure how common this happens.

¹² There have been a number of books recently released that are based on work blogs, for example, *Blood, Sweat and Tea: Real-life Adventures in an Inner-City Ambulance* by Tom Reynolds (2006), *Wasting Police Time: The Crazy World of the War on Crime* by David Copperfield (2006), and, *Walking the Streets* by Bill Sticker (2007).

¹³ A survey by a Human Resource company called Croner suggests more than a third of UK bloggers have run the risk of dismissal by posting derogatory or damaging details about their workplace, boss or colleagues (Source: BBC News, 2007b).

A further employee application of Web 2.0 communication technology for the purpose of misbehaviour involves the uploading of personal videos, often shot at work, to social media web-sites such as YouTube. A case in point was reported by BBC News (2007a) and involves video clips of people who work for Somerfield (UK supermarket chain) performing stunts wearing the firm's uniform and posted on the Internet¹⁴. The antics include a man balancing on a beam in a storeroom, another riding on a floor cleaner and somebody racing round a car park on a pallet lifter. A further video is a spoof advert for the supermarket. The video in question features a man dressed in a standard shopfloor operative uniform, ignoring somebody trapped under a trolley, swearing at customers and pushing them into a display pile of kitchen roll. To increase the impact of the mischievous messages, details of the video were then circulated to those involved and workers of a similar level throughout the organization. Some of the videos posted by Somerfield employees have been viewed more than 20,000 times and attracted around 50 comments (on YouTube) by viewers, per video. At the time of the media release, Somerfield management claimed to be investigating the incident with view to taking disciplinary action, however, despite the threat, the videos remain in the public domain some nine months later. Researcher inquiries suggest searching YouTube, or any other similar platform, under the title of a well-known employer; will bring similar videos to light. However, employees who have recorded their misbehaviour on video and up-loaded it for wider dissemination, do not seem to have commanded the same level of media attention as work bloggers. Currently, therefore, we cannot not be sure of what effect such videos have on the long-term morale of non-organized and mainly low-level employees.

Reviewing incidences of employees exploring and exploiting Web 2.0 communication technology, as a means to cause minor embarrassment to employers, strengthen friendship ties and help survive work, seem to herald the arrival of a very new form of employee misbehaviour. However, what is more telling from the brief review is the level of networking and connectivity between similar types of employees, particularly those at the younger end of the age spectrum, and those least likely to be in a trade union. The networking may not necessarily be related to matters that trade unions could readily take advantage of, and it remains to be seen if trade unions can break into such networks and exploit them for awareness campaigns or organizing events. A further noteworthy

¹⁴ The Somerfield videos are currently easily accessible to the public. Simply visit YouTube and search under the term "Somerfield".

observation is how workers now have a very new way to frustrate their employers, especially if there is some truth in the disciplinary effects of new quality management initiatives (e.g. Delbridge, 1995). However, an over-reliance on researcher and media observations is problematic and more needs to be done to find out the extent to which employees indulge in and take heart from this form of e-misbehaviour.

Employers and Web 2.0 communication technology

It would be misleading to suggest the opportunities presented by Web 2.0 communication technology to employees has not been met by some degree of resistance, or even positive interest, by employers. As such, this sub-section represents the almost obligatory early cautionary tale of anything that appears, at first glance, to be a one-sided, new and exciting opportunity. Indeed, if we take the most telling factor to emerge from employees exploring and exploiting Web 2.0 communication technology, it is the exchange of knowledge concerning hidden dimensions of the labour process – e.g. exchanges of tacit technical and professional knowledge and dissemination of the realities of many workplaces. In short, critical labour researchers (e.g. Thompson and McHugh, 2002) believe many employers, especially those dependent on a labour process dedicated to converting knowledge into marketable goods and services, are likely to be drawn to seemingly benign and neutral forms of knowledge, and in doing so, find ways to separate that knowledge from the owner. In hypothetical terms, it seems, that many employers, especially those who operate in knowledge-dependent industries, are likely to be interested in a new range of tools that are characterised by employee exchange of what could be valuable, and ultimately profitable, knowledge. Employers may also be drawn and respond to such activities for more traditional reasons too. This sub-section, therefore, briefly outlines evidence to suggest employers are increasingly interested in exploiting the potential of Web 2.0 communication technology through their employees, and perhaps, dampening somewhat the radical capabilities of such technologies.

It is understood that several companies¹⁵ are experimenting with what Schoneboom (2006a) believes is an alternative strategy to work blogging – that is, ‘corporate blogging’ – creating policies that embrace employee bloggers, encouraging them to reveal their

¹⁵ According to research undertaken by Socialtext, as of 10/05/06, 40 of the American Fortune 500 companies encourage employees to blog. It also believed that America’s CIA is to launch an intelligence gathering communication tool that is based on popular social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace (see Sevastopulo, 2007).

identities and blog openly about work. Indeed, there is evidence that managerial literature has begun to notice the value of wikis and blogs as collaborative tools for virtual teams (e.g. Brown et al, 2007). A particular novel case of employee blogging involves graduate employees of Cadbury-Schweppes encouraged to blog about their experiences to an audience of future job applicants, and offer insights into their daily activities that no other medium can so easily provide¹⁶. Wood et al (2006), moreover, believes corporations are beginning to use blogs for two quite different applications – internal or employee blogs that give employees the chance to write about ideas and issues that affect the organization, and, external or corporate blogs that act as a means for employees to interact with customers and the public. Research on corporate use of blogs is limited; however, one scholarly case study offers a detailed analysis of the organizational benefits of one high profile example that involves a combined use of corporate and employee blogging initiatives. For instance, Efimova and Grudin (2007) believe employee blogs allow employees to share passion for their work and to communicate directly with others inside and outside the organization, show the human side of the company, and, document and organize their work. This work concurs with previous research that suggests blogging could emerge as an effective knowledge building and communication tool (Hoel and Hollins, 2006). However, Hoel and Hollins are less optimistic of the potentials of employee blogging and believe there may be difficulties with employee blogs unless the institution recognises the social ownership of the blog space and balances this out with a liberal approach to their protected authority. In other words, employers may only see limited returns from blogs unless age-old problems with trust and discipline in the employment relationship can be addressed. Furthermore, encouraging an employee to blog on work time may impede upon the pursuance of such activities on non-work time.

In reality most employer organizations do not encourage their employees to blog on work time. Instead the majority of employers are more interested in controlling the activities of employees who wish to disseminate information in such a manner, or get involved in any other similar activity that might contravene upon their objectives. For example, the Ministry of Defence recently (August 2007) introduced new guidelines barring military personnel from speaking about their service publicly. Their guidelines have been updated so that soldiers, sailors and airforce personnel will not be able blog or post on bulletin boards without permission of a superior, if the information they use concerns matters of defence

¹⁶ See <http://www.cadburyschweppes.com/EN/Careers/UKGradRec> for more details of this initiative.

(Gillan, 2007). In more general circumstances, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development has gone on record as likening some forms of work blogging to 'illegal' activity (Spencer, 2005). As such, employers are encouraged to up-date information and communication policies to ensure a proportionate response to unofficial employee blogs.

A further trend in terms of employers responding to the massive up-take of Web 2.0 communication technologies by their employees off work time, has been the monitoring of social networking sites as a method of recruitment. Brockett (2007: 15), for example, contemplates the issues involved in exploiting the information provided by people on their social networking homepages by declaring that 'The big issue for employers – and HR – is whether to embrace this trend or give it a wide berth'. The dilemma for HR professionals, however, concerns the extent to which seeking information from someone's Facebook entry, or observing and monitoring the activities of employees who have set up networks around work and employment issues, is considered practical and ethical. Case studies provided by Brockett suggest there is no consensus on whether such a practice is ethical or cost effective. However, knowledge that many employers are now increasingly monitoring what many employees do in their Cyberspace lives may lead to a change in the manner by which many people of working age apply Web 2.0 communication technology.

Evidence that employers take an interest in Web 2.0 communication technology for knowledge management purposes, or to monitor and learn from how employees apply such technology away from work time, is at best underdeveloped and at worst anecdotal. What is known, or what seems likely, is that few employers are in tune with the organizational benefits that Web 2.0 communication technology can bring. Where employee blogs are employed by organizations it appears to be driven by a hunger for tacit employee knowledge, even if it is unclear, as of yet, how organizations can and should decipher such a myriad of information and ideas. Some organizations, in effect, may just be content to own non-useable information and ideas, and, the means to store and access it. Moreover, few employers seem prepared for the Web 2.0 activities of employees, other than to treat the matter as a form of misbehaviour, subversion of authority, or outright malice. A more common approach appears to involve Web 2.0 communication technology as an augmentation to existing recruitment and selection strategies – this could include current employees blogging to the outside world and offering outsiders an insider view of the work of an employee, or, for recruiters to research a potential candidate through social

networking or blogging platforms. However, one thing seems certain in all of this, and this is to suggest the application of Web 2.0 communication technology represents a new dimension to the contested terrain between employer and employee.

Discussion and conclusions

Investigating how employees apply the Web could take many directions and just three similar directions were pursued in the current research. The aim of the paper is to suggest, and demonstrate to a certain extent, that Web 2.0 communication technology has opened up a wide range of opportunities for employees to pursue a certain range of work and employment-related ends. The evidence presented, although sketchy, sparse and superficial at times, pointed towards a strong suggestion of new trends in employee Cyberspace activity. The newness, however, is characterised most of all by the fact that the activities occur in Cyberspace and not, for example, out of view of management on the shopfloor, in the works canteen, or in a physical venue outside of work. A further main difference with interactions in Cyberspace is that employers, currently, do not have anywhere near as much command of their employees in this domain as they do on work time, or, perhaps, through employment law. In more detail, the current research suggests employee use of such technology has created a new and refreshing bank, although chaotically organized at present, of information and knowledge on employment-related matters. Further, the technology also represents tools by which employees can campaign against the actions of employers, albeit not in an open and confrontational manner, and, tools by which employees can undermine the sterile and polished images of corporations portrayed by employers or senior management. In other words, Web 2.0 communication technology offers a framework for disruption and subversion through a range of technology that can foster a culture of connectivity between groups with similar employment-related interests. Having said that, employers appear similarly interested in Web 2.0 communication technology and the evidence presented indicated some employers are already in the process of appropriating and experimenting with such technology, for their own ends. Employers, moreover, appear to be increasingly aware of the threat that these tools may pose to their main objectives and taking action on that front too. In either respect, however, more research is needed to investigate these claims and creative research methodologies applied to meet the challenges of monitoring and analysing the activities and interactions of many millions of people.

Many dimensions of the current study, however, remain either unsubstantiated or unknown. For instance, there is very little specific social survey or case study evidence to back up claims that Web 2.0 communication is a useful tool for those developing their careers and looking for employment, organizing a campaign to subvert the demands of management or to further the interests of the employees, or applying Web 2.0 communication technology as a method of nurturing friendship groups to survive the demands of work. What evidence has been put forward in the current study is interesting and promising, yet it is lacking, in most instances, the rigour typically associated with scholarly research. Another assumption is that we have no way of knowing the maturity of the current trends in employee application of Web 2.0 communication technology. In effect, are the trends merely the result of a rather exclusive experimentation with such technologies and set to quickly disappear from view as new technology takes over? Could it be that the trends are not growing and in reality waning, as employees grow disillusioned by their efforts and employer resistance? Or, could the activity be close to a critical mass that could change the face of industrial relations – a phase of enlightenment where employees make significant use of such technology and take their Cyberspace activity into an era defined by real results? More unknowns include what drives the employees to take focus their work-related attention on Cyberspace, e.g. is the trend related to ease of use, fashion, desperation, lack of freedom to take traditional routes, cost, the option of anonymity? A quite different dimension involves the extent to, and manner in which, employers are responding to employee WWW activity, and how, for example, the conflict between employer and employee may be shifting from traditional knowledge management tools and the physical work area to Web 2.0 communication tools and Cyberspace.

Employee application of Web 2.0 communication technologies to further and defend interests related to employment is clearly in its infancy, and so is the research that surrounds that phenomenon. As such, the findings from the current research point towards many interesting directions for future research activity; some that follow the themes outlined in the current research and some themes not covered or yet to emerge elsewhere. While WWW observations and press reports of such activity are likely to continue being useful ways to monitor such activity and be the spur for new research in many different directions, it appears that the most sensible basis for greater research within the area should some sort of social survey of employee application of Web 2.0 communication technology. Following on, or concurrent to such a social survey, must be a wide-range of

detailed case studies of employee application of Web 2.0 communication technology. Knowledge generated by research of this kind is likely to be of interest to a wide range of actors, especially those whose interests are aligned to the practice and discipline of industrial relations.

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