

Technological change has transformed where people work, when and how. Digitisation of information has altered labour processes out of all recognition whilst telecommunications have enabled jobs to be relocated globally. ICTs have also enabled the creation of entirely new types of 'digital' or 'virtual' labour, both paid and unpaid, shifting the borderline between 'play' and 'work' and creating new types of unpaid labour connected with the consumption and co-creation of goods and services. This affects private life as well as transforming the nature of work and people experience the impacts differently depending on their gender, their age, where they live and what work they do. Aspects of these changes have been studied separately by many different academic experts however up till now a cohesive overarching analytical framework has been lacking. Drawing on a major, high-profile COST Action (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) Dynamics of Virtual Work, this series will bring together leading international experts from a wide range of disciplines including political economy, labour sociology, economic geography, communications studies, technology, gender studies, social psychology, organisation studies, industrial relations and development studies to explore the transformation of work and labour in the Internet Age. The series will allow researchers to speak across disciplinary boundaries, national borders, theoretical and political vocabularies, and different languages to understand and make sense of contemporary transformations in work and social life more broadly. The book series will build on and extend this, offering a new, important and intellectually exciting intervention into debates about work and labour, social theory, digital culture, gender, class, globalisation and economic, social and political change.

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Close Watch of a Distant Manager: Multi-surveillance by Transnational Clients in Indian Call Centres

Winifred R. Poster

Introduction

Much of the emphasis in the surveillance literature is on the role of employers as the group that enacts surveillance in the workplace. Yet given the growing transnationalisation of work and expanding capacities of technology, other actors are gaining influence. This is well illustrated in the global service industry, which performs tasks for businesses (often through, or for, information and communication technologies) rather than producing tangible products. In this chapter, I focus on the Indian call centres to show how *clients*—the ones who contract the services of outsourcers, from their position in the US—take on roles as virtual managers.

W.R. Poster (✉)
Washington University, St. Louis, USA
e-mail: wrposter@gmail.com

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Clients are the firms that 'purchase' services from Indian call centres. In India, the clients are US and other global north organizations in a variety of industries. Most often, these are financial and banking firms like Citibank, JP Morgan Chase, GE Capital/Genpact, Standard Chartered Bank, and HSBC Bank (Poster 2013b). Second most common are telecommunications and computer firms, like Sprint, T-Mobile, Dell, etc. Call centres in my study, however, also take contracts from a number of other organizations such as utilities companies and governmental offices.

We might expect clients to stand back from the surveillance process inside the call centres. They are physically far away from the call centre in India. Moreover, they have chosen outsourcing as a way to relieve themselves of this burden. They have relinquished responsibility for daily tasks by removing customer service functions from their own offices.

Yet, clients often use technology to *enhance* (rather than reduce) their presence in the outsourced call centre. This analysis centres around several technologies which help clients to become active participants in the daily operations of call centres: autodialers, speakerphones, metal detectors, and shopfloor webcams. These technologies enable them to have control over: (1) the core process of connecting US consumers to Indian workers; (2) the training and monitoring of Indian workers; (3) the supervision of Indian managers; and (4) the analysis of habits by US consumers who buy their services or products.

I argue for a situated view of technological agency with workplace surveillance. Much attention is turning to the role of big data (e.g., the massive collection of information about workers and consumers) as the new strategy of surveillance in organizations. However, I will show how clients in my study don't always gravitate towards the most sophisticated and/or data-driven technologies. They often deploy mundane technologies for their surveillance, and those that are hard-wired to the workspace rather than immaterial. These technologies also vary in location. Some are physically in or regulated from the US, like the autodialer, while others, like computer units and speakerphones, are placed in the offshore location. Straddling political borders and geographic zones, these technologies are more complicated than those located in a typical single-sited workplace.

Moreover, I will complicate our understanding of surveillance itself by arguing for a framework of *multi-surveillance* in the global service economy. Clients, like many participants in Indian call centres, observe many groups at once and in turn experience the gaze of all those groups. Consequently, surveillance in Indian call centres does not play out as neatly as one might expect. Rather than a uniform and unidirectional process, surveillance by clients is fractured, multiplied, and interconnected with that of other groups.

A Multi-surveillance View of Indian Call Centres

Clients represent one spoke in an array of surveillance practices within the global service industry. Call centres perform back office functions for organizations by managing interactions with the public over the phone. Starting around the year 2000, US (and other global north) firms began to move these functions overseas to third-party firms. India became a prime destination for its highly educated, English-speaking, and inexpensive labour force. Now, there are at least two million workers in the wider 'business processing management' sector of India.

There are many participants in the industry, and groups who engage in surveillance. The major actors—US client firms, technology vendors, and customers, and Indian managers and workers—all observe each other on a regular basis. In what I call *multisurveillance* (Poster 2011), these groups use sophisticated software programs along with routine ICT devices, to do the everyday work of monitoring and disruption.

In Indian call centres, surveillance occurs transnationally and coalesces along group lines. These groups conduct surveillance from positions within a 'global service grid' which is organized along two types of hierarchies—one of service relations, and another of transnational relations. Laid out conceptually as a four-box grid, its vertical axis represents labour process categories (manager and worker), and its horizontal axis represents postcolonial categories (global north and global south). *US clients and vendors*, accordingly, sit in the upper left hand corner, privileged by socio-geography and corporate power. *US consumers* sit below them,

still in the global north but subservient in service authority. On the right-hand side, *Indian managers* sit at the top, as organizational leaders who are nonetheless beholden to US authority for funding and contracts. Finally, *Indian workers* are below them, facing the downward pressure of labour as well as geographical marginalization.

Within this frame, then, surveillance is a social movement tactic. Participants *mobilise collectively* to assert their interests. They do it not simply for domination and resistance, but as multiple (and shifting) hegemonies and counter-hegemonies. Surveillance, ultimately, is a form of electronic activism that is practiced by many groups transnationally, both separate and together. Clients represent a *hegemonic* form of surveillance, in the sense of seeking technological control over mass publics for the aim of maximizing profit. Yet they are not alone. The power of observing and over technology, does not reside in a single group but is spread wider. It belongs to other elites—such as US vendors who create the surveillance systems and techniques, and to Indian managers who do the direct supervising over workers. Similarly, workers are not the only ones to resist to these practices through *counter-hegemonic* surveillance. Rather, the challenge to elite surveillance is launched on two fronts from both consumers and workers, and from two geographies, the US and India. Significantly, this dual, cross-cutting system of the global service grid generates multiple affiliations and orientations for action. Groups change their orientations and shift their allegiances. My larger project examines all five groups and their complex relations; here I focus on the agencies of clients in their multi-surveillance.

The implication of the global service grid for clients, therefore, is that they are pulled in two directions. On one hand, they are influenced by the corporate pressures of lean production, flexibilisation, cost-cutting, etc. These dynamics encourage clients to spread their business processes transnationally—keeping administrative functions at home while outsourcing customer service functions abroad. On the other hand, they are pulled in another direction by consumers and workers who demand accountability and limitations on their surveillance practices. In response, clients negotiate this dual tension by becoming virtual managers. Their strategy is to supervise from afar. Their multi-surveillance reflects an interest in keeping tabs on all the staff (both managers and workers) abroad, as well as the consumers at home.

Research Methods and Sources

The analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Indian call centres from late 2002 to early 2004. Fieldwork was done in the northern region of India near New Delhi, in the neighbouring cities of Noida (state of Uttar Pradesh) and Gurgaon (state of Haryana). Three call centres were the focus of the analysis, representing variations within the industry in terms of size, ownership, and global positioning: BigCo, as a multinational firm, with about 3000 employees; MediumCo, as a joint venture firm with a US company, and about 200 employees; and SmallCo as an Indian-owned firm, with 40 employees.

Among the various types of data, I conducted 50 semi-structured interviews with phone-calling employees, and 20 interviews with human resource managers, quality control personnel, recruiters, trainers, nurses, etc. Another 15 interviews were conducted outside the firms with experts and professionals from the community, such as representatives of industry associations, government officials, and employee associations. I observed the 'production floor', attended training seminars, joined agents for dinner in the cafeteria, etc. Names of the firms and the employees have been changed for anonymity.

Between 2009 and 2015, I did further research to explore actors in the US who participate in this story—the vendors, clients, consumers, etc. This involved analyzing websites of call centre and technology companies, and viewing 'webinars' or online videos about their products and programs. I also conducted interviews with experts in the call centre industry and consumer advocates. I then triangulated or layered this data with material from my Indian-based interviews, gaining a richer perspective on customers, clients, and vendors from the people who interact with them on a daily basis.

Remote Clients and Their Surveillance Technologies

Focusing on several representative devices, the following outlines techniques of multi-surveillance for clients to become virtual managers in Indian call centres.

Autodialers

The autodialer or 'router' automatically feeds phone numbers to workers' computers and initiates the call. It enables clients to have control over the most basic element of production process—the timing and routing of the calls themselves (Aneesh 2009). Clients also apply this vendor technology for another purpose—to extend their agency in surveillance on the Indian work site.

Clients like the autodialer, first, because it performs many tasks of the *worker*. It decides whom to call and when to call. It listens to the response by the customer. It catalogues how the call is answered. In this process, the autodialer can tell if a human versus machine answers the phone. It can identify a real person by his/her 'rate of speech, the amplitude of syllables and wait time' (Original Sources: Computer Audio Engineering). With a special 'hello chip', it analyzes the greeting by word and repetition. If the autodialer hears, 'hello, hello, hello?' when it calls, it knows that a live person has picked up the phone. The autodialer can also tell if a machine answers. If it hears speech that is continuous and lasts too long without stopping, 10–20 seconds, it will mark the response as an outgoing message of an answering machine. If it hears three special information tones (SITs) preceding a 'no longer in service' message, the autodialer will mark the line as a disconnected number. After this, it will sort and store the customer phone numbers that it collects, by re-entering them into the system, discarding them, etc.

All of these tasks previously done by the worker—the surveillance of customers, the logging of consumer information into the database, the subsequent sorting of phone numbers, etc.—are done by the system. What makes this possible is the speech recognition software.

Clients also like the autodialer for its ability to take over functions of the *manager*. It surveilles the pace of work—how fast the employees are working, if they are being too idle, if they are entering wrong numbers, etc. It can also slow or speed the rate of calls. One technology in particular, 'predictive' dialer (a successor to the autodialer), reduces unused time within the call routing process. It estimates (or 'predicts') the likelihood that, on one hand, the customer will be available to receive the

call, and on the other hand, the worker will be able to attend to it. It selects customers who fit desired profiles. It assesses employees who are ready to receive the call by patching calls to workers who are free, based on their department or skill level.

The effect of this technology on increasing the pace of calling is palpable for workers: 'Most of the call centres had automatic diallers [sic], meaning that you can not influence when a call is made. Sometimes you have to make 400–500 calls per shift' (Original Source: GWN 2007). Indeed, call centres in India have higher call volumes than those in other countries, perhaps in part due to the extensive use of predictive dialers. One study reports that Indian workers serve an average of 180 customers a day, whereas workers in the US serve 75 customers (Batt et al. 2005).

Clients assert their agency over autodialers in other ways. Some clients manage the autodialer by housing it on or regulating it from their own premises in the US. At MiddleCo, the autodialer was located in Florida. Clients also set rules on how autodialers run. In many cases, clients decide the call duration, and number of calls per employee, as well as how many employees should be hired (Original Source: Centre for Education and Communication). In these ways, autodialers allow clients to be managing when they are not physically there.

However, clients don't always use autodialers to replace humans. Sometimes, they use this technology for the opposite purpose—to insert *themselves* directly in the management process. Some clients are actively involved in the monitoring of calls and checking firsthand how well or poorly the workers are doing in the interaction (D'Cruz and Noronha 2006). Preeti, working at Hero Spectramind, explained to me how clients enter their own numbers into the dialer in order to pose as customers. This way, from their home offices then, they can secretly check on employee conversations.

If clients are suspicious of a particular employee for improper behaviour (like unusually high sales, etc.), they may ask the quality department onsite to patch them through to listen in on live calls. Clients monitor data streams from the 'customer relationship management' (CRM) software and surveillance technology. They keep track of individual workers and immediately communicate with Indian supervisors about their performance. A female worker at GE Capital in Gurgaon

reported that, 'If someone missed a call, a manager would call from Australia and complain about this particular worker' (Original Sources: GWN, No. 1, 2007). In these ways, clients use the autodialer and other vendor technologies to bring themselves into the core process of call centres, as if they were on the shopfloor.

Workers have their own point of view about autodialers, of course. Some see the downsides. Pradeep at MiddleCo, who goes by the American alias George Lawson, observes how the router may call the same customer over and over:

Because of telemarketing calls, people are very much frustrated. Just take an example: [Let's say I'm a customer, and] my name is George Lawson. If a person calls me at my place – but *my mom* picks up the phone, and she talks to that person, and she says "No, no sir. I am not interested." Still, [the agent] puts it [in the computer] as "call back" – rather than as "not interested" – because only *my name* [George Lawson] was there in his computer. So what is happening is that person, or that household, gets that call near about ... seven to eight times. This is the basic case. So it gets very, very frustrating. That's why you people [Americans] are again and again calling us [to complain]. [Emphasis added]

The dialer reads the input from the software, and then automatically sends repeated calls to the same customer without regard to context or appropriateness. Vendors and clients are aware of this. In fact, there is a name for it in industry lingo—it's called 'recycling' (Original Sources: Computer Audio Engineering). Recycling is efficient from the client point of view, because it increases the likelihood of contacting the customer.

Yet while vendors and clients may be indifferent to the effect of the dialer on customers, many workers are not. Pradeep feels frustrated about his powerlessness over the technology. He empathizes and identifies with the customer because of it. It's quite telling that in his story, Pradeep places *himself* in the role of the customer—the one who is targeted by the recycling. He relates to their experiences more than those of his own colleagues in India or clients in the US. Ironically, an unwitting

consequence of deploying this technology by clients is creating bonds between customers and workers. This is an example of how the global service grid results in alliances among groups transnationally.

Consumers in the US get fed up with the autodialers. They have waged a number of legal battles against clients through the government. Significantly, this battle does not take place in India—where the call centre is, where the workers are (who make the calls), and where the managers are (who oversee the calling process). Rather, legislative opposition is mounted in the US, as the dialer falls under the accountability of the client.

The most notable policy win for consumers was in 1991 with the Telephone Consumer Protection Act (Original Sources: US Govt, FCC). TCPA curbs the use of autodialers by businesses in several ways. First, it limits *whom* they can call, by excluding emergency phone lines, hospital rooms, and paging services (which would lead to charges for the person receiving it). A 2003 supplemental ruling also prohibits autodialer calls to cell phones. Second, it limits *the duration* of the calls. The TCPA requires that autodialers must end their connection within 5 seconds after the consumer hangs up (since some of the systems some linger on the call and tie up phone lines indefinitely). Likewise, it requires predictive dialers to transfer the call to a live agent within 2 seconds of the recipient's greeting. Third, it sets limits on the error rates of autodialer technology—no greater than 3% of the calls that they dial may fail.

A note on the TCPA is how it links various call centre technologies. Just as it places restrictions on *autodialers*, it simultaneously limits use of *virtual representatives* (or 'V-reps'). V-reps are automated call centre workers, based on artificial intelligence and other computer programs, who act as stand-ins for live employees (Poster 2016). The TCPA says that businesses may not use artificial and prerecorded voices while dialing any home phone number (with some exceptions like prior consent from the recipient, etc.). Calls must also state the name of the business, as well as the phone number, at the beginning the greeting. These two central devices of the customer service industry are *packaged together* in consumer protection policies, revealing how the state recognizes underlying connections in these systems in their effects on consumers. In sum, the dialer

is a way for clients to maximize their control of the outsourced call centre, while minimizing the role of Indian managers and workers.

Communications and Infrastructures

As another strategy for bridging the distance gap, clients use communication technologies (both large and small). These routine devices enable clients to make their presence known through sound and sight, and to insert themselves in the daily activities of the outsourced call centre. Notably, while the autodialers above enable clients to control the *timing and path* of calls, speakerphones, and videoconferencing systems enable them to control the *content*. In this way, clients remotely manage the substance of employee conversations with customers and many other informal aspects of the labour process.

Speakerphones. Some technologies are small and unobtrusive. We see this in the example of employee training. Clients go to great lengths to be involved in the day-to-day running of these sessions. One might think this would be the first thing that US firms would release to Indian managers. These classes can be mundane and repetitive, for instance, in breaking down the minutia of American English grammar, speech, and accent to workers. In fact, even Indian managers subcontract the process to local professionals, teachers, and drama coaches, who come in from outside and take over. (Ironically, this act constitutes an 'outsourcing' of tasks by the outsourced call center).

Yet, US clients in my study often wanted to be involved in these mundane matters. Employees told me that *training* is the context in which they most commonly encounter the clients. *All* the call centres in my study were set up to handle direct electronic participation by clients in the training process. At SmallCo, clients used a simple speakerphone and desktop computer. Employees would gather round the table in the conference room to hear sessions through this box, by trainers in the global north. The President describes: 'There is one new process from the UK for some wireless campaign, and the trainer will be on the speaker phone, training from UK. There will be more training through

the web—through the video conferencing.' Even in such a small firm, with so few employees, clients make their presence known.

Clients become teachers in these long-distance classes. They join in on a significant component of the training process—role-playing. They listen to workers play their parts and then comment on the performance, as an instructor would. Or, they play a part themselves. That's what happened when I walked in on a live client session at MiddleCo one day. A client from a Massachusetts gas company was on the speakerphone, posing a customer, and doing a mock call with an employee. Twelve other workers, as well as an onsite trainer, were in the room listening.

The client's first call was straightforward. She posed as 'Bailey Bainbridge'. She said there was a smell of gas coming from her propane tank. The employee gave safety instructions and confirmed the order details. The onsite trainer praised him for 'giving good information'. His emotional labour was lacking though. He 'took too much time with pauses, used too much informality ("I'm gonna"), and lacked confidence by giving imprecise phrases ("around \$250")'. With the next call, the client took on a different persona. Now she was 'Kathryn', a much more belligerent customer. From the top of the conversation, she started with questions about outsourcing for 'Mike', the worker:

Kathryn: Where are you?!

Mike: You've reached an emergency call centre.

Kathryn: What's the name of your city?!

Mike: I'm not able to disclose this. What's the problem I can help you with?

Kathryn: I'm out of gas for my forklift and Zambini.

Mike: Sorry, what is the problem?

Kathryn: I need gas for my Zambini! Do you even *know* what a Zambini is?!

[Exchange repeated three times].

Mike: Yes, we can deliver gas containers to you.

Kathryn: Will there be charge for delivery?

Mike: Yes, you have to pay the outstanding balance to the deliverer.

She was trying to refer to a *Zamboni*, the machine that smooths ice at skating rinks, but apparently she didn't know her constituents, nor their everyday technologies, very well. Notable here is how clients pose as customers through the technology, just like they did above with the autodialers. In this case, they do so not in secret, but outright.

Role-playing in the mock calls is a key tactic by clients for inserting themselves in the training process. Substantively, they are assessing performances of emotional labour and national identity management. While emotional labour in the call centre involves affective displays of cheerfulness, deference, service, etc., (Poster 2013b; van Jaarsveld and Poster 2012), national identity management involves the covering of Indian-ness and replacement of American-ness through accent and conversational style (Poster 2007). Thus, the gas company official was looking for things like: How will the worker handle the test of his American-ness? How well would he wear the American mask and hide the Indian location? From the trainer's point of view, Mike did a satisfactory job—he was 'polite, courteous, and he continued the conversation after the initial questioning of location.'

In this particular situation, the purpose of client role-playing was not just to give advice. It was a critical test of employee skill to start a new campaign. For employees, there was a lot at stake in this training session. They had been practicing for several weeks and this was their final examination. For the firm, there was an added pressure. This would be their first *inbound* campaign, or in other words, the first time they would be receiving calls *from* customers, rather than making calls *to* them. I learned later that they did not pass this test; several more weeks of training were ahead. Clients like this gas company are arbiters of when and how campaigns move forward, based on the direct contact with the outsourced call centre staff.

Video Conferencing and Auditoriums. BigCo has an elaborate infrastructure that enables clients to participate in trainings virtually. The Vice President for Human Resources explains:

We have a capacity to train about three hundred people at any one time. We have rooms where you do soft skills training: voice training, accent training, culture training, leadership-development training. Then we have

training rooms in each of the centres. Sometimes when there is a huge ramp up we do training on the floor as well, during off-shift hours. We have partitions – we move the partitions in, segment the floor out, and conduct training on the floor itself.

Large call centres like BigCo are set up for many kinds of trainings, as the VP explains, of varying sizes and for varying purposes.

Rooms with the most advanced technologies are reserved for clients. One is a 'trial call room' (as it was called on my building tour) or 'training centre' (as the VP refers to it). This is an auditorium set up for larger demonstrations. Here, workers engage in individualized tutoring and mock calls with clients, while also watching their local instructor in the front of the room. Other rooms facilitate technology training by the clients. The 'fitted room', for instance, has about 20 computers mounted inside the desks with glass. In this setting, employees not only *talk* to the clients, they *work* on client technology directly. They use client network servers and computer software—systems that are based *in* the US—to familiarize themselves with CRM programs before they get on the job.

To direct the work process itself, clients turn to other kinds of technology. At MiddleCo, they use the internet to deliver and supply materials for managers. The CEO explains: 'When we are selling a cell phone plan, for example, there are some standard questions that have been prepared by the client over a period of time, because of their experience with stuff like that, which is downloaded to our people'. For instance, they send the script for carrying out national identity management, so that workers can practice and use it on the phone. They send lists of movies to show in training sessions to teach American culture.

Clients even provide lists of aliases via the web for workers use in their American identity posing. 'Arnold' at BigCo, for instance, received his name from a major US computer company. These clients have pressing reasons to be involved with this process firsthand. At MiddleCo, the Vice President of Human Resources told me that the US government requires its corporations (through their outsourcing managers) to keep all employee aliases for a minimum of 5 years as part of fraud prevention measures:

We have to guard all the accounts, all the information that we have, and keep records of alias names ... to insure that we comply with [the] law. If someone [an employee] uses an alias name, we have to insure that we keep it for some period of time. We try to show that them that we keep it for at least 5 to 7 years. ... We never destroy it.

This is an Indian law? A federal law?

A US federal law. ... We have to keep all sorts of data ... as part of the Telemarketing and Consumer Fraud and Abuse Prevention Act. ... We don't have to show it to anyone, but one should keep it ... just in case you have to track a person down. I've heard of places where – not in India but in US – where they've had a problem with fraud, and they've had to track it down through the person.

Practices of national identity management—in the form of employee American names—are under the purview of the US government. Clients, accordingly, set rules for Indian call centres about the record-keeping of this information.

For workers, being on the receiving side of client regulations can be confusing. This is because the clients of global call centres change, sometimes frequently. Indian call centres take contracts from multiple clients—consecutively at the small ones, and simultaneously at the large ones. Each of these clients, in turn, may have their own national identity management rules. This means that managers must 'change ... names and identities of workers to suit clients' needs' (Original Source: Centre for Education and Communication, p. 82). Siddhant at MiddleCo describes how his alias changes with each new client:

When I was working in U.S. mortgage, it was Richard Lee. But then when I came to U.K. mortgage, the clients insisted that your alias-name has to start with the same letter as your original-name. That was for the entire team, so the entire team's alias was changed. So since my first name is Sachin, it was Scott Lee then.

Clients, therefore, have authority over a significant part of the labour process. The alias may seem like a small detail but it is very meaningful for employees. It is a major component of their 'identity' on the job

(Poster 2007). When clients change then, so does the employee's identity.

Architectures and Separate Entrances. Clients exert their will not only through small devices like speakerphones, and mid-size infrastructures like video auditoriums, but also through the space and geography. They take over the physical layout of the call centre. This happened at the Convergys call centre with its client Citibank:

I used to work for Convergys, in the Citibank process. In total about 600 people work there, it is a 24×7 process. ... Citibank had a[n] individual floor and entrance in the building. People working for Citibank were also obliged to wear a tie, the others not. So you could see who works for Citibank and who is not. ... Convergys made sure that they got the people with the best accent for the Citibank process. ... The other people at Convergys would not get these incentives. The basic wage would start from 8,500 rupees for beginners, they could go up to 17,000. Some people made 26,000 total wage including incentives. [Original Source: GWN, No. 1, 2007, emphasis added, reordered for clarity]

Sectioning off a floor of the building enables Citibank to maximize the efficiency of its control. It can set its own pay, bonuses, and benefits. It can upscale the status of its service. The client can mark its service brand on employee bodies (e.g., in the uniforms they wear and requirements for ties), and on their verbal exchanges (e.g., by requiring higher standards for English accents and thereby raising their linguistic cachet). Not surprisingly, these kinds of client-specific rules create tensions *among* workers in the same larger call centre, as they see their colleagues experiencing different labour processes—on different floors of the building and with different clients.

In all these ways, clients are diffusing their influence throughout the call centre. Employees are hearing clients live on the phone, using client technologies via networked servers and computer, and working by client rules as transmitted via the web. Clients direct the intimate and substantive aspects of *what* workers do on the calls, aside from the quantitative aspects of *how* they do it culled from CRM software.

Disk Drives and Metal Detectors

A third strategy for client intervention in outsourced call centres is through disk drives and metal detectors. These devices represent a physical surveillance. They are material items, but their purpose is immaterial. By monitoring workers' movements and their use of physical objects, clients identify and manage the flow of information—that is, by checking for data that workers may carry in their hands and on their bodies. While managers are the ones to install this equipment, it is the *clients* who often give the original directive.

Many of the call centres in my study were fortified digitally like military installations. The first sign is a lockdown of the computer terminals. Along with the phone, the computer is a main tool for call centre work. Yet in MiddleCo, all computers are stripped down to prevent access to what's inside. They look like blank boxes, completely closed off. There are no USB ports, no disk drives, and in some cases, no keyboards. There are no places to enter things in or take things out, nor any buttons to press. Special software devices prevent copying or downloading. Search engines on browsers are configured with programs to monitor and restrict web surfing.

Similar procedures are reported in other studies of call centres within the global south. In South Africa, for instance, team leaders use paper shredders to destroy any notes workers made during the call, and then they scour workstations for any bits of remaining paper (Ball 2010). They also restrict printers to specific campaigns, so that employees working on other campaigns do not have access to them. Workers understand that these policies are linked to the US client, and not their immediate managers. Umesh at MiddleCo continues:

Everything is under the Nondisclosure Act—anything and everything within this company. Clients are very particular about those things because the database is very expensive—from the client that sells the database, for the lead that you call. If I take it outside, I can sell it to anyone.

In this way, the computer becomes a conduit for client control.

What's remarkable is how this practice extends almost all the way up the corporate ladder. Even the managers running the call centre experience this electronic lockdown. Umesh describes the impact of this policy on his daily activities, like transferring work between home and office:

We work at home, but I plan what I need to do. I plan as to [what] I need to make the script for this campaign. I can *get* something from home, but I would not *take* anything from this place, outside. That's the reason why we are scheduled with 8 hour shifts but get extended to 12 hours, 13 hours, 15 hours sometimes. [Emphasis added]

Client regulations on everyday tools—the internet, laptops, digital storage drives, etc.—create a break in the virtual flow of tasks between spheres. In this technologically intensive industry, ironically, managers are left with pre-technological methods to do their work. They use paper, pen, and the human brain to bring work back and forth. They do it 'in their minds' or 'on paper'. The higher ups are subject to the same rules as the shopfloor workers—even at the expense of their executive, administrative and supervisory responsibilities that they need to do for the firm.

Traditional labor theory would predict that the brunt of these policies is aimed at *workers*, especially those who make and receive calls on the shopfloor, i.e., those who have the least amount of authority. With a multi-surveillance view however, we find that *all the staff* of the outbound call centre, from top to bottom, are under suspicion for data theft. Indeed, clients in global call centres treat managers just like workers—as potential criminals. The result is that even the highest-level staff are under surveillance by clients.

Metal detectors are another example of the client control apparatus. The campus of BigCo has metal detectors in its many security checkpoints. To get to the shopfloor, I had to pass through two walk-thru metal detectors: one outside the building at the entry gate and another inside the building. All my electronic equipment was confiscated. In order to bring my tape recorder inside for interviews, I had to get a signature from the CEO himself. Once inside, all the rooms and halls inside are pass-coded and ID card-restricted. Especially surprising was

that employees go through security checkpoints on their way *out* of the building as well as on their way in. This is a critical component of the surveillance process. Managers need to watch employees in order to intercept information that is potentially being taken away from the site.

In this context then, the human body is surveilled as a vehicle for carrying and passing information. Data is protected above all else by these call centres. This was evident in the legal documents I had to sign to do my fieldwork. They make clear the value (financial and otherwise) of the data that is circulating in the call centre. When I signed this letter, managers at BigCo wanted me to know who I was doing it for and why. The Vice President of Human Resources said: 'We'll get you to sign a NDA [non-disclosure agreement]. *It's not for us. Our clients are very sensitive, for the right reasons, for the information security*' (emphasis added). US clients are tagged as the source of measures to protect information. Still, Indian managers defend their legitimacy. It's 'for the right reasons', he told me. In this way, both managers and clients justify the bodily surveillance of workers.

An interesting corollary is that, during all this fuss over data security, the *safety of humans* is of little interest. Protecting bodies is not the main goal of these strategies. Guards were not checking whether entering visitors were bringing in harmful objects. (This includes people visiting the CEO—there were *no* metal detectors or security checks in his building at BigCo). Indeed, weapons checking—among the high or low staff of the firm—is not the point of this surveillance.

This is not surprising, given the orientation towards public safety by the Indian state. Officials have done little to secure metropolitan spaces, despite the many bombings that occurred during the prior decade to this study. In fact, it wasn't until the late 2000s that many buildings were fitted with bomb detection equipment on their entrances. (At that, the technology was old school. Incoming cars were inspected underneath with mirrors on a stick and a human eye scanning the trunk.) Rather, the primary concern here is about the mobility and tracking of data. With call centres, we see how the 'electronic panopticon' (Zuboff 1988) is being realized more vigorously in information technology sites than in other spheres of Indian society—even prisons. My follow-up research project is revealing an absence of technological surveillance in some

prisons in India—no metal detector walk-thrus, no surveillance cameras, no electronic locks on the doors, etc., (Poster 2013a).

Aside from guards with guns, the monitoring infrastructure is minimal and markedly pre-technological. Given that the prison was the site of Foucault's original analysis of the panopticon (1979), this is quite telling. The information age and its diffusion of data throughout social life has recasted the manner in which bodies are surveilled in a given space. Bodies are surveilled aggressively not just for discipline, but when they are linked to sources or movements of information. In outsourced call centres, we see how clients play a role in making this happen, by pushing this strategy from the global north.

In sum, disk drives and metal detectors illustrate how clients use electronic *hardware*—not just the software—to bridge the distance gap. With these devices, clients are able to control over the physical actions of workers and managers transnationally. Unlike the case of the autodialers above, these technologies are not in the US. They are in the Indian call centres themselves: on the shopfloors, in the hands of the workers themselves, and in the computer terminals they work on. These devices are farther away from clients. Yet, they are primary tools for clients to assert their agency. They show how clients use remote technologies to keep tabs on outsourced labour processes.

IP Addresses and Webcams

So far, this chapter has considered how clients use technology to manage from afar—now I turn to the ways they use technology to manage *at home*. In this section, we see how clients actively surveil the last group: consumers. Clients use the same techniques on consumers as they do on workers. Furthermore, they use surveillance of workers (both locally and globally) as strategies for monitoring and managing consumers at home. Client surveillance of customers is informational through things like IP addresses and visual through things like webcams.

Informational Surveillance. The first way clients observe consumers is through information and databases. Gathering and storing data about consumers are major undertakings, and not surprisingly, an entire

industry has developed around them. Indeed, 'one of the fastest-growing businesses on the internet is the business of spying on consumers' (Angwin 2012). Firms either invest their resources in collecting the data themselves, or buying it from specialized consumer research agencies like Claritas, Dun & Bradstreet and InfoUSA (Thelen et al. 2004). Purchasing this information is one of their costliest activities—up to two-thirds of a project budget.

Clients collect many types of information about consumers—their phone numbers, addresses, credit histories, spending habits and preferences. This data has many uses in a call centre for the routine tasks that employees do. An example is how clients collect extensive amounts and types of data on consumer ethnicity. Whether or not consumers are aware of it, firms are profiling and examining their ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds. They do this through communications technology, by determining which populations live in which calling areas. Nass and Brave (2005) recommend that firms use Caller ID and email internet protocol addresses to assess languages and accents for the areas where consumers live. One firm in Japan uses consumer telephone area codes, mapping the phone regions according to ethnic concentrations and geographies.

The purpose of this data is not to monitor consumers themselves, however. It is meant for the employees who serve them. Clients use data on consumer ethnicity to construct an ethnically compatible workforce. With this information, clients instruct call centres how to groom their staff, so that employees match the accents and cultures of the major ethnic groups in consumer neighbourhoods. This practice is supported, and in fact recommended, by research from Nass and Brave. They find that 'people like interfaces with personalities similar to their own' and 'prefer voice personalities that complement their own' (2005, p. 5). In accordance, managers select workers, train them through intensive national identity management, or buy V-reps, to reflect the ethnic leanings of their consumers. Consumer data, therefore, is a starting point for selecting and managing the identities of workers.

Market research firms survey consumers about their feelings towards foreign workers and their preferences for nationality in service. Studies in the UK report that 60% of buyers would change suppliers if companies

shifted their calls to India. For financial and retail services, consumer opposition was higher, at 95% (Read 2001). This data is used to gauge backlash and subsequently train workers in national identity management. Finally, clients collect data on broad populations of the global south to determine their potential as an outsourcing workforce for the future. An offshoot of the market research industry—in offshoring projections and forecasting—has arisen just for this purpose. Data gurus analyze and advise on the best destinations. They survey a host of populations from all over the world, especially in the global south, and then rank them to produce an overall 'index of opportunity'.

Good prospects are identified by many traditional indicators: economics (GDP, wage rates), technology (infrastructure), human capital (skills), legal systems (intellectual property laws), and government (corruption, political relations). Clients of call centres have similar offshoring concerns as those in other transnational industries (e.g., manufacturing, etc.). However, as seen in the 'Global Outsourcing Report' (Original Source: Minevitch and Richter 2005), clients of interactive customer service are looking for additional criteria in their outsourcing destinations: language capabilities, cultural affinities, and adaptability. In fact, 'language, accent and cultural issues' ranked on average *ahead* of 'the potential to strike' and 'the existence of government incentives' in the level of importance to these firms, according to a report by Business Insights (Original Source: Eastwood).

Global south countries are then rated on their potential and 'risk' for each of these dimensions. In 2005, India was at the top of the list. In fact, its cultural rating of '1' (on a four point scale) was a main reason why it beat out its second place rival, China, which was rated a '4'. These kinds of intangible factors, i.e., concerning people's social habits, are primary indicators for how clients rate consumers abroad. In this way, international information gathering is a tool for seeking out new outsourcing locations by clients. The general population of a nation—its citizenry, consumers, etc.—is assessed for its potential to become a workforce for call centres.

Visual Surveillance. The second way clients observe consumers industry is visually. Clients are teaming up with vendors to develop new technologies for watching the bodies and movements of customers.

Clients observe consumers directly through webcams. Most major stores like Walmart have installed video cameras. The purpose is to keep track of, analyze, and then modify consumer behaviour—to change their flows through the store, to reduce their proclivity to steal, etc. Firms are beginning to place these cameras in other locations. Vending machines that sell small items in public places (and thus perform the function of retail employee) have been around for more than a half a century. However, now they are being equipped more human abilities. Facial recognition systems scan the bodily features of the customer, analyzing, and assessing things like skin and wrinkles (Rosenbloom 2010a, b). Before the machine accepts money or dispenses goods, for instance, it determines if the customer is old enough to buy tobacco products. Robotic vendors, therefore, are imbued with *policing* functions over consumers.

Facial recognition software is somewhat reminiscent of emotion detection, which I have described in my broader project (Poster 2011). Clients are using intrusive equipment to surveil consumers, just as they do with employees. In this way, firms are watching consumer bodies in order to regulate the consumption and marketing processes.

Clients use webcams on consumers for another reason, though – to acquire data about *other* groups like workers. Vendors like Cisco Systems offer technologies that can track the patterns of consumer movements around the store, and how long it takes employees to serve them. By monitoring consumers, firms can check how well workers are doing their jobs.

Turning the tables on this dynamic, moreover, clients are observing *workers* so that they can control *consumers*. Take the case of Asda. This is the second largest supermarket chain in the UK, and a subsidiary of US-based global retail giant Walmart. In 2010, the company installed webcams in its subcontracted garment factory in Bangladesh (Bachelor 2010).¹ The factory produces clothes for the brand ‘George’, which Asda sells in its stores.

Curiously, the firm wasn’t interested in viewing employees for itself. They broadcasted the feed on their corporate website, so that the live video of workers in Bangladesh would be visible to the public. They could see, firsthand, factory employees putting finishing touches on jeans and casual trousers, testing quality in the textile laboratory, etc. The ultimate end user of the Asda webcam, therefore, would be consumers in

the UK. The shopfloor webcam, pointed at Bangladeshi workers, was designed to pacify Asda’s own angry consumers. It came in response to charges by consumer and media groups that Asda had substandard labour practices in its outsourced factories. These cameras would reassure consumers that items produced overseas were done so under fair conditions. The goal therefore is dealing with consumers back at home.

This case illustrates the way clients exert their agency in the global grid. Asda sends work abroad while simultaneously seeking to regain control of it at home (in this case, to manage political fallout). It also shows how the global grid distributes power and propagates multi-surveillance. Consumers have authority over clients by using the media and threats of boycotts to hold them accountable for their labour practices. Consumers even express solidarity with workers in the global south. In turn, clients attempt to subdue their protest through surveillance systems (i.e., webcams and websites).

Though this case is outside the call centre industry, it foretells a possible future for visual surveillance. Given the growing concern about data theft by consumers, webcams may become more appealing to clients and managers of offshore locations. Despite the fact that the medium for worker–customer interaction is verbal, clients may feel that observing employee behaviour *physically* during the call may serve as an extra measure of security. Such practices are already being used in home-based call centre work. Domestic outsourcing firms that operate through ‘crowd-sourcing’, i.e., routing calls to employees’ homes, are using visual surveillance to keep tabs on these unsupervised workers. Firms like Odesk (now called Upwork) use software that takes six random screenshots per hour of employee computer terminals, and makes them available to clients (Shellenbarger 2008). One can see the trend moving to offshore call centres quickly as well.

Discussion

Clients are increasingly making their presence known in call centres. Kinnie and colleagues have noted this process domestically. They observe how, within the UK, clients are having ‘direct’ and ‘indirect influences’

on their own national call centres (Kinnie and Parsons 2004; Kinnie et al. 2008). Indirectly, they imprint the values of the brand, set targets for customer service and finance, organize the shopfloor into teams, and monitor call centre data instruments. Directly, they may oversee day to day operations of the call centre—from the recruitment of telephone workers, to the hiring and promotion of line managers, to the onsite training and induction for new campaigns, and to the dispensation of wages, bonuses, and prizes for competitions between employee teams.

With transnational outsourcing, we might expect that such close attention by the clients is hard to put into practice, and perhaps even undesirable. Gaining distance is the main reason why they outsource to begin with, as I opened the chapter. Even so, clients of Indian call centres maintain their hold over the day-to-day operations across borders, and they use technology to facilitate this. For some tasks, like regulating the pace and quantity of calls, etc., this is easier to do (Original Source: Centre for Education and Communication). They simply install auto-dialers and various CRM software packages, and let them run. However, this chapter also reveals more extensive and on-the-spot interventions in the labour process by clients. They participate in training sessions. They send detailed materials like scripts for phone conversations and aliases for the employees. They assess workers individually. They control where workers walk in the building. They direct what workers do with their computers. They monitor both workers and as well as managers. And so on and on so forth.

Their surveillance reflects a tension of the global service grid—contradictory imperatives of relinquishing authority for the shopfloor to managers who are in India, and simultaneously using technology to gain it back. Pressures at the centre of the global service grid pull them in (more so than for vendors). We saw this, for example, with the storage-keeping of employee aliases. Consumers and the state make clients legally accountable for some of the goings-on in outsourced call centres, through legislation like the Telemarketing and Consumer Fraud and Abuse Prevention Act (Original Source: US Govt.). So, as much as clients would like to withdraw, they are compelled otherwise.

Clients negotiate this role carefully. They extend their presence wide enough to have agency in the call centre, but limited enough to avoid

everyday problems. Clients operate behind the scenes and are rarely seen in full view. They use these technologies as a way to extend their reach into the call centre. Some clients do make periodic visits to Indian offices, especially when starting a new campaign. They also bring employees to the US for training. This is usually reserved for higher level workers, the 'team leaders'. However, none of this was going on at any of my firms during my fieldwork. I did not see a single American or British client while on a tour of a dozen or so call centres with a local official. Rather, the most common means for client travel is virtual. Employees like Pradeep at Middle-Co are acutely aware of this:

What is happening is that clients never interact with us. They'll always be in contact with one of the directors of this company, or with the assistant managers, or maybe with the TL's [team leaders]. *There are very, very few situations when a client comes to you and talks to you.* That's what I'm saying, because a client never comes to us. They always convey their message to the directors that "This is our requirement, we have to achieve this number of sales or...or this thing or that." According to that, we have to work. So ultimately, they rule us. This is the basic thing. *Maybe they are not ruling us directly, but indirectly they are on our head.* [Emphasis added]

Being elusive is part of the virtual persona clients seek to project—one that does not have overly identifiable features. Not having a face obscures accountability to workers.

What this chapter shows, then, is how clients are *selectively hidden*. They use technology to reveal themselves (e.g., in training sessions, on speaker-phones), but also to mask themselves (e.g., in the monitoring process, feeding their numbers into the autodialer and posing secretly as customers). Through this process, clients can direct from abroad without being seen.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined how many devices help call center clients maintain their authority digitally, if not physically, from afar. Overseas clients use: *autodialers* to control the core process of connecting US consumers to Indian workers; *speakerphones* to participate in the training

of Indian workers and monitoring Indian managers; *metal detectors and disk drives* to restrict the flow of information and movements of workers in the Indian building, and *IP addresses and webcams* to monitor consumers who buy their services or products. I have argued that, in a system of multi-surveillance, they are able to carry this out on a range of different actors in the transnational call centre industry all at once: Indian managers, Indian workers, and US consumers.

These agencies call for a reworking of how surveillance is traditionally conceptualized. One reason is transnational dispersion. Outsourcing doesn't remove the job of supervising and administrating from the global north. Instead, it adds another layer management transnationally, thereby installing administrators in two regions of the global economy. One is remote and virtual, the other is onsite and live. Clients are often directors of the technology in global call centres; managers, in contrast, are the enforcers. Thus, because of the dispersion of the global service grid itself, power is more decentralized. It is distributed among different types of elites, including clients and vendors.

A multi-surveillance view also shows us that surveillance in the global service economy is not monolithic. Client practices sometimes vary from—and clash with—that of other elites in the global service grid—particularly vendors. While vendors would like clients to adopt computerized stand-ins, clients don't necessarily use technology to replace themselves (or workers). Their surveillance is not always algocratic (Aneesh 2009), in the sense that their interest is not uniformly in autonomous systems that will run without them. Instead, clients choose technologies that enable them to be the distant managers of the global call centre, so that they can control directly from afar. This represents an important challenge to the narrative of vendors—even if just a small one. Clients reject the notion of *fully* automating call centre processes, expressing instead a commitment to human workers and customer service jobs. Critically, this reveals fractures of authority in the global service grid. Supervision over call centre operations is at times divided between vendors, clients, and managers, and across global north and south.

Finally, there is a shifting of surveillance gazes. Neither the directions nor the targets are stable. Rather, actors pivot in their positions in the grid based on their situational interests. For instance, Indian workers at

times bond with the US client, crossing lines of both service and geo-political authority in the grid. The brand name of the client is very meaningful for employees, both in symbolic and material terms. It helps them build a prestigious resume and accrue higher wages. In fact, many times employees choose jobs based on the reputation of the client rather than just the call centre. At other times, those workers bond with their Indian managers *against* the US client, when those managers help them resist surveillance imperatives from the global north. Thus, as I show in my larger project, the same people who monitor each other can also become partners in the surveillance of others, as they find common adversaries in the global service grid.

Notes

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