Following trends and developments in employee uses of the Internet: Challenges and practicalities when researching secretive and hidden Internet phenomena

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Overview

- My research area and interest in Internet phenomena
- Initial and emergent research/methodological problems and dilemmas
- Research strategy/design and Internet phenomena
- The realities of researching hidden/secretive Internet phenomena
- Tips and advice for researching secretive and hidden Internet phenomena

My research area and interest in Internet phenomena

- PhD (2000 to 2006) looked at acts of "organisational misbehaviour"
- Ethnographic-styled/participant observation
- Circa 2004 rise of employees fired for blogging about jobs, e.g. Dooce, Washingtonienne, Queen of the Sky, Woolamaloo Gazette
- Portrayed commonly in media as employee misbehaviour:
  - Harm to employer reputation
  - Inconsistent with business mission
  - Misrepresentation of company brand
  - Loose cannons

Initial and emergent research/methodological problems and dilemmas

- How common is this type of blogging?
- How can such blogs be found?
- What are bloggers trying to achieve or getting from blogging about their jobs and how can I find out?
- How best is it to contact such bloggers about taking part in a research project?
- How willing are such bloggers to impart information about their blogging habits?
- How can trust be established between researcher and participants?
- How else are employees experimenting with similarly emergent social media technology?
- How could such phenomena be related to literature?
- How would I analyse my findings?
- Who would actually be interested?

Research strategy/design and Internet phenomena

- Work from the inside – create a blog and link to work bloggers (April 2004)
- Provide information on blog about me, my employer and my research
- Design survey
- Semi-structured interviews – telephone, instant messenger and email
- Link on blog to media reference to similar phenomena

The realities of researching hidden/secretive Internet phenomena

- Very time consuming
- But…highly engrossing…and plenty of media attention!
- Finding and linking to work bloggers (over 1,000 eventually)
- Categorising bloggers
- Contacting bloggers to take part in research - survey positive responses; interviews far less so
- Blogging about work and social media based on media references and emergent research articles

Tips and advice for researching secret and hidden Internet phenomena

- Be at least fairly clear about what you want to do, what you want to find out and what existing literature your research is likely to fit best with
- Make sure this is something that interests you
- Spend time developing an Internet-based profile/reputation based on creating trust and credibility in virtual communities
- Pilot your work
- Have a plan B
- Be prepared for a big commitment and (possibly) bemused colleagues, supervisors and friends!

Publications to come from my Internet-related research

- RICHARDS J. "'Because I need somewhere to vent': The expression of conflict through work blogs". New Technology, Work and Employment, 23, 95-110, 2008.

- RICHARDS J. "How employees can leverage Web 2.0 in new ways to reflect on employment and employers". In S Murugesan (ed.), Handbook of Research on Web 2.0, 3.0 and X.0: Technologies, Business and Social Application. IGI-Global, 2009.

- ELLIS V & RICHARDS J. "Creating, connecting and correcting: Meanings of work-blogging amongst public service workers". In S Bolton & M Houlihan (eds), Work Matters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Employment. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2009.

- RICHARDS J. "'What has the internet ever done for employees? A review, map and research agenda". Employee Relations, 34, 22-43, 2012.

- RICHARDS J. & KOSMALA K. "'In the end, you can only slag people off for so long': Employee cynicism through work blogging". New Technology, Work and Employment, 28, 1, 66-77, 2013.

Any comments or questions?