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To cite this article: Karen E. C. Levy (2016) Digital surveillance in the hypermasculine workplace, *Feminist Media Studies*, 16:2, 361-365, DOI: [10.1080/14680777.2016.1138607](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1138607)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1138607>



Published online: 25 Feb 2016.



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COMMENTARY AND CRITICISM

Introduction: Gender and technologies of work

Susan Berridge and Laura Portwood-Stacer

The two essays collected here consider the gendered dimensions of shifting cultures of work in response to the growing demands of the technologized/mediated workplace. Karen Levy's essay explores the impact of new digital surveillance technologies on constructions of masculinity in the male-dominated US long-haul trucking industry. Jacquelyn Arcy draws upon feminist theories of 'women's work' to consider gender in relation to digital immaterial labor, focusing specifically on emotion management. While looking at very different examples, both scholars illustrate how new technologies throw into sharp relief traditional constructions of gender and gendered labor.

Digital surveillance in the hypermasculine workplace

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New workplace technologies are often met with resistance from workers, particularly to the degree that they challenge traditional workplace norms and practices. These conflicts may be all the more acute when a work culture is deeply and historically gendered. In this Commentary, I draw from one such context—long-haul trucking—to consider the role a hypermasculine work culture plays in the reception of new digital monitoring technologies.

I base my analysis on ethnographic study of the United States long-haul trucking industry between 2011 and 2014. My research focused on the use of digital fleet management systems to achieve legal and organizational compliance. The research was multi-sited, taking me to eleven states in total, and to many sites of trucking-related work, including large and small firms, trucking conventions, regulatory meetings, inspection stations, and truck stops. Throughout the work, I spoke with and observed a wide variety of industry participants—truckers themselves, of course, but also fleet managers, technology vendors, trucking historians, insurance agents, lawyers, police officers, and many others.

Trucking and manhood

Trucking is a profession marked by defined cultural norms, which manifest in drivers' professional identities and day-to-day behaviors. Socioeconomically, the trucking population is comprised of blue-collar workers, of relatively modest means, and heavily gendered: the trucking population is at present about 95 percent male (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2013).

The work culture of trucking has historically placed high value on freedom. Many drivers profess that what they like about the job is its relatively self-directed nature, and the ability to go about one's day-to-day work without extensive managerial oversight—a rare characteristic in most blue-collar employment settings. As one trucker explained his work (quoted in Shane Hamilton 2008, 195–196): “what I like about truckin’ is that even if you drive for someone else, there ain’t anybody standing over you when you’re out there on the highway.”

Masculinity is of particular salience in the trucking profession, and finds expression in several ways. Some drivers consider themselves “family men” for whom economic provision (for spouses, children, grandchildren) is the foremost justification for their often arduous labor. Others express manliness through “cowboyism,” often involving open scorn for legal and managerial authority, general resistance to rules, and proud self-reliance.

The cultural iconography of the trucker evidences some of the values, tropes, and mythologies inherent in the community. In classic trucker songs and films, the trucker (nearly always male) is depicted as strong, rugged, and robust; the truck itself operates as a mechanical extension of his masculinity.¹ The size, weight, and power of the machine he controls helps to define and legitimate the trucker. (Compare Raewyn Connell's [1995] discussion of men's bodies *as* machines.) As Hamilton (2008, 200) puts it: “Especially for someone with little education and limited economic opportunities, the sense of control that came with piloting a big rig could make a man feel that he, as an individual, mattered.” In trucker culture, the trucker is portrayed as being unafraid of danger, sexually virile, unfettered by social ties, and wily enough to outsmart and overcome the misguided and bungling efforts of law enforcement or bureaucracy.

In addition to visual representations, country music has had a key role in forming truckers' occupational identity, even as it created stylized mythologies of what day-to-day trucking is actually like. As Hamilton's (2008, 109–110) history explains, “When a man's workplace was the road, a trucker took no orders from the factory foreman and faced no line speed-ups or stopwatch-toting scientific managers.”

A nanny in the cab

Despite this iconography and the cultural norms it represents, trucking work is increasingly subject to remote digital surveillance. Truckers' work hours are capped by federal regulations in an effort to keep truckers from driving when overly fatigued. However, truckers have long flouted the regulations in response to economic pressures to stay on the road (Karen Levy 2014, 2015). Federal legislators have reacted by mandating that drivers' hours be monitored digitally via in-cab electronic logging devices (ELDs), replacing the paper-and-pencil logs that drivers have traditionally used. The mandate is pending and likely to take effect in the next two to three years.

Though such devices are not yet required across the industry, they are already in wide use (1–1.5 million trucks). This is because electronic logging modules are typically bundled with other monitoring capabilities in digital *fleet management systems*, which are capable of capturing and analyzing many other metrics about a trucker's work—commonly including fuel efficiency, real-time geolocation, braking/acceleration patterns, speed, lane departures, and other aspects of job performance. These data are often used to enforce company policies as well as to monitor legal compliance (Levy 2015). Other management systems include cameras (road- or driver-facing) intended to observe physical signs of negligence or fatigue and provide records of driver behavior.

Unsurprisingly, these management systems have been met with considerable resistance from drivers, who sometimes refer to them as “nannies” or “tattletales” that facilitate micro-management and devalue their hard-earned road expertise. Next, I describe how truckers' deeply gendered workplace culture makes these technologies of work an especially challenging fit.

Emasculating technology

New technological management techniques challenge truckers' gendered occupational norms in three fundamental ways.

First, monitoring technologies challenge truckers' *autonomy*, which is deeply valued and goes hand-in-hand with their masculinity. Being “manly” was a key occupational value for many truckers, and relates closely to both the freedom they value in their work and reliance on self-knowledge as opposed to electronic directives from a home office; many truckers describe such systems as treating them like children. Electronic management systems are seen to deride and devalue their autonomy and knowledge, and concomitantly, an element of their identity.

Second, monitoring technologies pose a cultural challenge because truckers' masculinity has particular salience around *fatigue*. Protestant notions of hard work, manliness, and virtue have been historically connected to the denial of sleep (Alan Derickson 2013). The idea that “sleep is for sissies” finds expression in occupations as diverse as investment banking, coding, factory work, and truck driving. Lack of sleep, and the lengths to which truckers will go to stay awake, have long been glorified in truckers' “war stories” and in the media. Consider Dave Dudley's famous confession in “Six Days on the Road” that “I'm takin' little white pills / My eyes are open wide” (referring to amphetamines). Truckers have historically relied on all manner of tricks to stay awake, including inhaling ammonia, moistening their eyelids with onions, even “light[ing] a cigarette and sleep[ing] until it burned down and awakened them by scorching their fingers” (Derickson 2013, 122). Today, many truckers use (legal or illegal) stimulants to stay awake. One study describes how truckers reproach one another for not being man enough to “stay in the saddle” and notes that truckers “displayed a certain pride in endurance that was reflected by a slang term peculiar to them, ‘doing the double’” (Lawrence J. Ouellet 1994, 134–136).

Truckers, then, perform masculinity as stamina. Monitoring technologies confront this practice by (at least attempting to) mitigate fatigue, and by challenging truckers' perceived self-knowledge about their inherent biophysical limits. As one trucker stated in a regulatory comment: “A computer does not know when we are tired, [f]atigued, or anything else. ...

I am ... a grown man and have been on my own for many many years making responsible decisions!"

Third, these technologies challenge truckers' capacities for *economic provision*. The "cow-boy" identity that attends the profession can be understood in part as a cultural gloss necessitated by trucking's political economy. Truckers take part in the exploitation of their own labor by "self-sweating" (Michael Belzer 2000; Paul Willis 1981) by resisting or circumventing safety regulations on the basis of economic necessity, in order to provide for their families. As one of my informants put it:

When you talk about breaking [the law] ... and you talk about electronic regulation and things like that, ... [it's] important for me to touch upon the financial conditions which produce that kind of behavior[.] ... There are a lot of men out there who, there wouldn't be food on the table, frankly, and the lights wouldn't be on at home if they weren't breaking the law and if they weren't using drugs.

By attempting to circumvent some of these dangerous behaviors, electronic monitoring technologies are perceived as an obstacle to truckers' ability to provide economically in the manner to which they have become accustomed, which they feel reflects upon their worth as men.

Conclusion

Truckers' cultural opposition to workplace technologies does not result from them being Luddites generally; truckers are, in fact, quite savvy technology users. Their constant mobility gave rise to an early need to use communications technologies to talk to family and friends at home. Truckers were the primary adopters of citizens band (CB) radio, which remains in wide use. And trucks themselves are, of course, complex technological artifacts, which truck drivers routinely tinker with, personalize, and repair.

But new technologies that wrest control away from truckers confront the gendered cultural norms and mythologies that have arisen over the last several decades in the industry. Trucking is more than a work process; it is also an enactment of masculinity, a form of economic provision, and an extension of sexuality. For working-class men in particular, "bodily capacities *are* their economic asset" (Connell 1995, 55); both these forms of integrity are jeopardized by technologies that reduce truckers' economic autonomy in the name of purported biological deficiency. To a far greater extent than in many other workplaces in which technological monitoring has pervaded to enact greater managerial control, deskill workers, or maximize productivity, in trucking such monitoring clashes acutely with truckers' gendered occupational culture, norms, and values.

Note

1. The connection between masculinity and machinery, particularly regarding vehicles and driving, has been drawn in a number of other contexts (see, e.g., Amy L. Best 2006; Ben Chappell 2012; Daniel Miller 2001).

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Emotion work: considering gender in digital labor

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With the rise of digital media, the autonomist Marxist concept of immaterial labor has been widely used to describe how quotidian online interactions generate cultural and economic value (Tiziana Terranova 2000). The term immaterial labor refers to the unpaid communicative and artistic labor that produces the cultural content of commodities (Maurizio Lazzarato 1996). In the contemporary digital media economy, companies depend upon consumers to create and circulate content as participation builds brand value and supplies demographic data that can be sold to advertisers (Mark Andrejevic 2008).

While media scholars have examined how online interactions produce value for media corporations (Andrejevic 2008; Trebor Scholz 2013; Terranova 2000), there has been less attention paid to the gendered dimensions of immaterial digital labor (though see: Sarah Banet-Weiser 2011; Brooke Erin Duffy 2015; Kylie Jarrett 2014). This is particularly striking as employment in the post-Fordist economy has become increasingly service-oriented and reliant upon the gendered skills of flexibility, networking, and affective labor, a shift Angela McRobbie (2010) calls the "feminization of work." To contribute to an emerging stream of critical feminist scholarship on digital immaterial labor, I focus this essay on how feminist theories of "women's work" may be brought to bear on conversations about new media participation. My purpose is to propose a new direction for research that focuses on a specific dimension of gendered labor—women's assumed expertise in emotion management—and how that expectation is intensified in the digital realm.