The Impact of Computer-Mediated Communications Monitoring on Organizational Communications Content

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THE IMPACT OF COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATIONS MONITORING ON ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS CONTENT

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Abstract

Employer monitoring of communications is prevalent, and new legislation is increasing use of the practice, potentially leading to unintended and unexpected consequences. While there is ample evidence that use of computer-mediated communications (CMC) media influences what people communicate, the nature of CMC content is difficult to predict. Several theories suggest that CMC is less inhibited due to anonymity effects and reduced social cues, while others suggest social influence is amplified, even to the point of producing hyperpersonal communications. Organizational monitoring of CMC adds complexity to the consideration. Might monitoring attenuate extreme communications behavior? Or could it promote different extreme communications? This research employs a laboratory experiment to examine how monitoring organizational computer-mediated communications impacts their content. It brings together our current understanding of CMC with surveillance research and consideration of the impacts of self-focus spawned by the environmental shift towards vastly increased CMC monitoring. It also aims to substantially develop our understanding of self-awareness theory issues of automaticity and standard selection.

Keywords: computer-mediated communications, CMC, monitoring, electronic surveillance, self-awareness, instant messaging, IM

Employer monitoring of communications is prevalent and on the rise. Electronic monitoring has long been used for customer service quality assurance, gathering employee feedback data, increasing security, and for the promise of productivity enhancements and management efficiencies. The 2002 Sarbanes-Oxley Act has strengthened monitoring motivations. This legislation requires that computer-mediated communications (CMC) be recorded, stored, and produced on demand. Given the increasing prevalence of recording CMC and the peril these records may create, proactive companies are monitoring their communications to take appropriate liability-limiting actions. While monitoring may seek both to capture current behaviors and to influence them, we have reason to suspect that it also causes unexpected and unintended consequences.

Several theories suggest CMC encourages communication that is less inhibited in some respects than face to face communication. For instance, anonymity effects and reduced social cues may lead to anti-social behaviors like flaming (Sproull et al. 1986). At the other extreme, CMC may amplify social influence (Postmes et al. 1998) and lead to hyperpersonal communications with richer, more highly social content (Walther 1996). While there is ample evidence that CMC influences what people communicate, the nature of CMC communications is difficult to predict. Organizational monitoring of CMC adds complexity to this consideration. Might it attenuate extreme communications behavior? Or could it promote different extreme communications? Self-awareness theory explores the motivational consequences of self focus (Duval et al. 1972), a state likely to be induced by CMC monitoring. This research begins to investigate the complex interaction of CMC and organizational monitoring, specifically examining how monitoring CMC impacts its content. It will extend prior research by bringing together our current understanding of CMC with surveillance research and consideration of the impacts of self focus spawned by the environmental shift towards vastly increased organizational CMC monitoring.
Self-awareness theory

At its heart, self-awareness theory predicts that when self-focused, people evaluate themselves according to a standard relevant to the area of self-focus. When they find themselves falling short of or exceeding the standard, they become motivated to alter their behavior to achieve alignment between self and standard. When they find alignment, they are motivated to maintain it by inhibiting standard-inconsistent actions. We now examine the relevance of this theory to CMC monitoring.

According to self-awareness theory (Duval et al. 1972), attention is oriented either towards oneself or towards one’s environment. Self-focus is the act of directing attention towards oneself. Video cameras and physically present monitors are among the well-tested means of inducing self-focus. CMC monitoring affords a number of possibilities for increasing self-focus through Gestalt figure-ground affects on attention (Duval et al. 2001). As a means of inducing self-focus impacts the area of the self focused on, we believe that communications monitoring draws attention to one’s communications.

Once individuals are self focused, they evaluate themselves (Gibbons 1990), with the outcome of this evaluation dependent on the standard applied for assessment (Duval et al. 1972). Standards are “images of correct ways to think, feel, act, and be. (Duval et al. 2001).” They “aren’t simply ‘behavior tendencies’ – they are comparison points that only influence action when participating in self-regulation (Silvia 2002).” Prior work on self focus has avoided the standard selection issue in one of two ways: by presenting a single standard without consideration of personal standards, or by selecting research subjects based on known personal standards without presenting an alternative standard (Silvia et al. 2001). While convenient for academic research, neither of these scenarios is realistic. In this research, we consider standard selection in a realistic context where subjects are likely to have pre-existing communications standards and the monitor’s communications standards are somewhat ambiguous.

When standards conflict, one must be chosen (Gibbons 1990). Self-awareness has been conceptualized as taking the perspective of some other person’s view of the self, a property that encourages adoption of the other’s standard even when a personal standard is in conflict with it. Experimental work that ignores the presence of personal standards suggests this to be the typical case, with dozens of studies showing operation of a just-provided third party standard (Wicklund et al. 1971). Self focus induced via knowledge of organizational monitoring is expected to cause speculation on the organization’s communications standard and to encourage its adoption.

According to self-awareness theory, when individuals assess their conformity with a selected standard, any misalignment (positive or negative) between self and the standard applied motivates alignment behavior. Even when self and standard are in alignment, individuals are motivated to inhibit standard-inconsistent behaviors (Gibbons 1990). With monitored CMC, we believe the self-organization communications standard comparison motivates changes in the nature of the communications delivered from those delivered over non-monitored channels.

Since communications can vary widely, predicting the nature of content changes requires focus on a particular communications context. We choose one that is sufficiently broad to be relevant to most organizations and a variety of organizational communications topics: hazard communications. Hazard communications are messages that might tend to incriminate an organization or its members. While suspicious, they are not necessarily indicative of wrongdoing. For instance, they may represent brainstorming before infeasible ideas are culled, convey misunderstandings or incorrect suspicions, or pertain to preventing or correcting mistakes. Whatever their motivation, hazard communications may be perceived to fall short of an ambiguous organizational standard for appropriate, “safe” communications topics, suggesting that monitoring may lead to a reduction in their incidence. A related class of communications that may be influenced by attempting to align one’s communications to an organizational standard is denials of knowledge of hazards. Denials offer a way to avoid engaging in hazard communications and possibly even to guide discussion away from a hazardous topic. Thus we anticipate denials to increase under organizational CMC monitoring.

In an organizational communications context, an alternative to self-focus and its consequences is avoiding use of monitored CMC channels that induce it (Duval et al. 1972). While completely avoiding monitored channels may not be possible, monitored channels are not typically the only ones available to organizational members. CMC monitoring may encourage channel switching behavior to unmonitored channels.

One unresolved issue with self-awareness theory is the degree to which the process is automatic (Silvia et al. 2001). While many of the activities studied with this theory do not appear to require deliberation, CMC rehearsability encourages it. The process of creating a message presents the user with a visual record of the intended communication, encouraging explicit consideration of its content. With monitoring, this takes place while an individual is self-focused and motivated to align to a monitor’s content standards, promoting deliberate action.

Research hypotheses are provided in Table 1.

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Holton, The impact of CMC monitoring on organizational communications content
Table 1: Research hypotheses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1</td>
<td>Organizational monitoring of CMC increases self-focus during monitored communications tasks.</td>
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<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>Organizational CMC monitoring increases the incidence of organizational standard selection over personal standard selection.</td>
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<tr>
<td>H3</td>
<td>Organizational monitoring of CMC changes their content.</td>
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<tr>
<td>H3a</td>
<td>Organizational members make fewer hazard communications under organizational CMC monitoring than on unmonitored channels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3b</td>
<td>Organizational members engage in more denials of knowledge of hazards under organizational CMC monitoring than on unmonitored channels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4</td>
<td>Misalignment between personal and organizational communication standards mediates the relationship between organizational monitoring and changes in CMC content.</td>
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<tr>
<td>H5</td>
<td>Following channel switching from a monitored to an unmonitored channel, the incidence of hazard communications will increase.</td>
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<tr>
<td>H6</td>
<td>Under organizational monitoring of CMC, communications behavior is intentionally, rather than automatically, altered.</td>
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</table>

Research method

This topic will be studied with a two stage, two group, post-test only laboratory experiment. Approximately 80 subjects will be randomly assigned to monitoring or non-monitoring conditions. In the first stage, subjects will engage in non-anonymous instant messaging discussions on a controversial topic that raises the possibility of hazard communications. In the second stage, they will meet face to face in small groups, giving them the opportunity to switch to an ostensibly non-monitored communications channel. Undergraduate university students will serve as research subjects, and an organizational topic of high interest and relevance to them has been selected: academic dishonesty.

Immediately prior to treatment subjects will view a pre-recorded audio-visual presentation on the increasing seriousness with which their university is treating academic honesty violations. This presentation serves to make them aware of the official organizational standard on academic dishonesty, while leaving the standard for communications about academic dishonesty subject to individual interpretation. This is similar to typical organizational contexts in which communications standards seldom receive explicit attention while standards for behaviors relevant to topics discussed may be known.

Subjects in the treatment condition will be told that while the instant messaging interview is for a class project, the university’s (fictional) Office of Academic Honesty has requested copies of the interview transcripts. Subjects who agree to monitoring will be informed that a recording device is being turned on, and a bright red reel-to-reel recorder will appear below the chat window as a visual reminder that the session is being recorded for the monitor’s use. In a pilot test, carefully scripted interview questions on topics related to academic dishonesty that avoid overtly asking for examples of incidents of cheating were shown to induce differences in hazard communications content based on treatment condition.

In the second stage of the experiment, subjects in the same treatment condition will be directed to an ostensibly non-monitored waiting room in small groups. A confederate will introduce the academic dishonesty topic in reference to the just-completed interview. The in-person presence of others with a shared experience provides an opportunity for subjects to switch communications channels from on-line to face-to-face while avoiding the self-focus induced by monitoring.

Independent variables include measures of self-focus; personal communications standards for the topic and perceived organizational standards, along with fit between the two; and standard selection. Widely tested items that ask subjects to rate the seriousness of various types of cheating will also provide context-specific measures of hazard intensity while priming the discussion topic. The interviews and waiting room discussions will be coded to provide measures of the dependent variables, which are counts of both statements about and incidents of communications in various hazard intensity categories volunteered by subjects. Denials of knowledge about hazards overall and in each intensity category will also be coded and similarly counted. Time stamp data will establish whether differential delays between question and response by treatment condition support greater deliberation over communications content under monitoring. Demographics and other pre-test measures will help to establish group equivalence or to control for departures from it, and a manipulation check will be conducted.
Contribution

Nearly a quarter century of work on the language/action perspective (Goldkuhl et al. 1982) has provided support for the notion that communication is a form of organizational action. This dissertation explores an area believed to be of considerable organizational impact: the enactment of monitoring through CMC. It will elucidate the role of a cognitive driver of CMC content, self-focus induction through monitoring. It will also contribute to our understanding of contextual influences on CMC content, and will provide a research method for classifying hazard intensity that may be applied in other contexts. In addition, this research aims to substantially develop our understanding of the unresolved self-awareness theory issues of automaticity and standard selection.

With use of CMC monitoring increasing dramatically, understanding behavioral consequences is critical for organizations. In the hazard communications context, comprehending communications content impacts may lead to changes in monitoring feature design or use that continue to satisfy legislative, security, or other motivations while enabling new benefits such as increased disclosure of hazards on which an organization would choose to act, and limiting drawbacks like reduction of incidence of other desirable communications.

References