Chapter 3: Anonymous Workblogging and Organizational Coping Strategies

Introduction

Ever since workblogs – online diaries about work – entered the mainstream in 2002, bloggers' rights have been hotly contested, and the fight for blogger freedoms has raised labor and civil rights issues that go far beyond the act of blogging itself. High profile fired blogger cases have helped to shape the debate and have led to discussion about free speech in the workplace, the right of workers to organize, employees' freedom to do what they like when off-duty, and the encroachment of work into personal space.

This debate has placed management in an uncomfortable position – those employers who have disciplined or fired bloggers in order to remove what they perceive as a potential threat to their company have been subject to hydra-like retaliation from the blogging community. For business as a whole, the media focus on fired workbloggers has created bad publicity, drawing attention to the economic vulnerability of workers and revealing cracks in a corporate ideology that promises unproblematic self-actualization through the labor process.

Anonymous workbloggers make fun of management buzzwords, celebrate time-wasting on the job, and express a lack of motivation and an underlying conviction that their labor is meaningless. Their writings mirror the claims of a critical sociological literature that includes the work of Arlie Hochschild (1997) and Andrew Ross (2002), which exposes the insidious consequences of corporate culture in terms of time-scarcity and self-exploitation. As an act of ironic distancing from one's job, anonymous workblogging demonstrates the complex navigation of organizational self outlined by Gideon Kunda (1992), where workers use dramatization and irony to resist colonization

of their private thoughts and emotions by the company. The highly networked, Internet-based nature of the blogosphere[1] affords employees the opportunity to transcend organizational boundaries, form alliances, and connect with traditional media in ways that go beyond the individualized and easily contained resistance demonstrated by Kunda.

Organizational attempts to stifle workblogging by increasing surveillance and making workers aware of the probability of dismissal if they are caught blogging at work or blogging about the company, suggest Burawoy's (1979) conception of the cyclical containment of workplace rebellion. Anonymous workblogs grant workers an "apparent freedom" that permits self-expression while securing willing participation in the labor process. Periodic crackdowns on workplace computer use, coupled with well-publicized firings of 'outed' workbloggers check bloggers' ability to write freely, successfully minimizing their threat to the ideological hegemony of management gurus.

Burawoy sees the cyclical containment of worker rebellion as a highly effective means of suppressing radical social change, but fired bloggers have demonstrated the ability to surprise management by transcending organizational boundaries and connecting prominently to mainstream media. While workblogs seem on the one hand to fit the cyclical pattern of relaxation and control suggested by Burawoy, they may also have the potential to fatally disrupt this self-regulating system and push for a radical social agenda.

Aware of the ideological disconnect presented by anonymous workbloggers, savvy corporations have begun to embrace blogging, promoting employer-sanctioned blogs and open discourse between workers and their supervisors as the way forward.

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[1] A collective noun commonly used to describe all the blogs in existence.

However, the energetic pursuit of anonymizing strategies and legal protections on the part of the blogging community indicates that bloggers continue to see a conflict between company interests and their creative freedom.

The persistence of workblogging harmonizes with Thompson and Ackroyd's (1995) claim that corporate culturism cannot foreclose worker misbehavior. Although workbloggers do not generally see themselves as engaged in a labor struggle, tending to characterize their blogging activity as an act of creative self-expression rather than an act of resistance or defiance (Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Richards, 2007), their artistic output potentially disrupts the labor process. Blogs promote countercultural values that militate against embrace of the organizational role and celebrate reclamation of company time for the pursuit of one's own creative projects. Where fired blogger cases have become *causes célèbres*, the debate has become focused on labor issues, highlighting knowledge workers sense of vulnerability and their rejection of job-centered fulfillment in favor of unfettered productive activity.

Fired Bloggers and the Media

In February 2002, Los Angeles-based web designer Heather B. Hamilton was fired from her job because of comments posted on her blog, *Dooce* (http://www.dooce.com). She had not mentioned the company by name and had concealed her identity, using only the pseudonym "Dooce," but someone emailed top executives at the company informing them that she was writing about the company on her blog and she was fired shortly after. The firing of Dooce became an instant hot topic in the blogging community and she was flooded with emails from her readers. The press

picked up on the issue and before long the term "dooced," to be fired from one's job because of one's blog, had become part of the blogging lexicon.

Dooce's blog was notable because it was extremely well-written, irreverent, and funny. Her postings in 2002 were varied but many described her experiences in the workplace, offering vivid and scathing caricatures of her colleagues. In "The Proper Way to Hate a Job" (Hamilton, 2002b), she counseled readers on "successfully avoiding any work related to your actual job," suggesting that readers spend the afternoon conducting, "seemingly academic experiments with bandwidth by seeing how many simultaneous downloads of 'Get Ur Freak On' your CPU can handle." At other times her portraits of colleagues were cleverly evocative, as in this description of her boss entitled "Intimidation": "When she talks with her hands she looks like she's molesting the air around her, sticking her fingers in holes and around forbidden curves. Often the air around her is the air around me, and my air doesn't appreciate it." (Hamilton, 2002a). Dooce's posts were littered with cynical references to team meetings and Powerpoint presentations, making fun of corporate buzzwords like "consumerizing," "creative shaping," and "expandable flow linkage," and demonstrating contempt for the company's cultural norms and its butchery of the English language.

As a well-paid employee of a high-tech company that had embraced contemporary management thinking, Dooce's comments were emerging from a workplace that afforded workers a significant degree of freedom to manage their time and set their own schedules, and her writing pointed to the exploitative and frustrating aspects of a boundaryless labor process. Yet prior to the firing, Dooce was also in good standing at the company and was far from being perceived as a disgruntled worker in the eyes of

her supervisor. As well as providing a safe place to vent about interpersonal conflicts, Dooce's blog gave her a way of distancing herself from those aspects of her job that she could not reconcile with her own value system, helping her to maintain an organizational self that could perform well on the job without total embrace of the company's culture.

As Gideon Kunda (1992) has shown, workers respond to the new emphasis on employee participation in a strong corporate culture in diverse ways, using irony, humor, and dramatic metaphors to negotiate an "organizational self" that meets the demands of the job while maintaining some distance from the company's claims on their private resources and emotional lives. As such, "The organizational self becomes an active and artful construction, a performance, a tightrope walk, a balancing act of organizational reality claims, fluctuating between contradictory modes of relating to the organization and always threatened with the threat of burnout, or the exposure of its own illusions" (p. 216).

Dooce's blog is in one sense an example of individualized role-distancing (G. Kunda, 1992), or innocuous blowing off of steam about minor workplace frustrations (Barsoux, 1993). However, the tone of her writings, the public nature of her blog and the media attention that her firing generated, suggests an altogether more explosive ideological disconnect, and represents a more threatening situation that goes beyond the type of self-contained and largely apolitical employee behavior analyzed by Kunda or Barsoux. Dooce's commitment to free self-expression, regardless of the consequences, persists as an inspiration to the community of bloggers who continue to risk being "dooced" by writing about their job or blogging on company time: "I made a conscious decision when I conceived dooce.com that I would never bow to the intimidation of

others, including employers or pussy-ass cocksmacks who think I should just stop

complaining and be a good worker bee already" (Hamilton, 2002).

Dooce's firing was the first of many highly publicized blogging cases between

2002 and 2005 that caught the attention of the media, drawing attention to labor issues

and demonstrating the reach that could be commanded by individual employees. In

January 2005, Joe Gordon was fired from the Edinburgh branch of Waterstone's

bookstore for his satirical blog, the *The Woolamaloo Gazette*

*(*http://www.woolamaloo.org.uk*),* becoming the first person in the UK to be fired for

blogging. Gordon, a senior bookseller in the store, had called the company

"Bastardstone's," nicknamed his "sandal-wearing" boss as "Evil Boss," and called him a

"cheeky smegger" for asking him to work on a bank holiday (J. Gordon, 2004).

*Figure 2: A graphic created in Photoshop by an anonymous reader of Gordon's blog,
who modified the Waterstone's logo in the store window to read "Bastardstone's"
(http://img154.exs.cx/img154/4706/bastard4hw.jpg).*

Quickly picking up on the situation surrounding Gordon's firing, *The Guardian*

newspaper defended Gordon and questioned the company's actions. Noting that the name

Woolamaloo is derived from Monty Python's fictional "University of Woolloomooloo,"

the paper conjured the ideal of healthy British irreverence against its institutions and authority figures. *The Guardian* article highlighted the fact that Waterstone's, which had carried out a 2001 advertising campaign that featured burned writings by Hitler and Pol Pot, had failed to live up to its PR image as a bastion of free speech (Barkham, 2005). Several novelists commented publicly, appealing for Gordon's reinstatement. Author Richard Morgan wrote in his letter, which was circulated via Gordon's blog, "The action that has been taken so far bears more resemblance to the behaviour of an American fast food chain than a company who deal in intellectual freedoms and the concerns of a pluralist liberal society" (J. Gordon, 2005c).

The word Bastardstone's (which Gordon had called his company in his blog) proliferated around the Internet, bringing condemnation from bloggers on both sides of the Atlantic. On his blog, Gordon collected testimony from people who had commented on his case and linked to other sites that were discussing the issue, marveling at the reach of his story: "In the Information Age we have electronic word of mouth: a message, if it strikes the right chord, may ripple outwards, forwarded on and on" (2005d). Sifting through responses from media and blog sources, he attempted to synthesize points of consensus that were emerging from the discussion:

"Common themes emerging seem to be about the possible erosion of the freedom of speech and expression …. and the intrusion of the corporate world into the personal; how far should a company have influence into the personal life of staff? Where do you draw the line? How much of your life is *your* life?" (J. Gordon, 2005a).
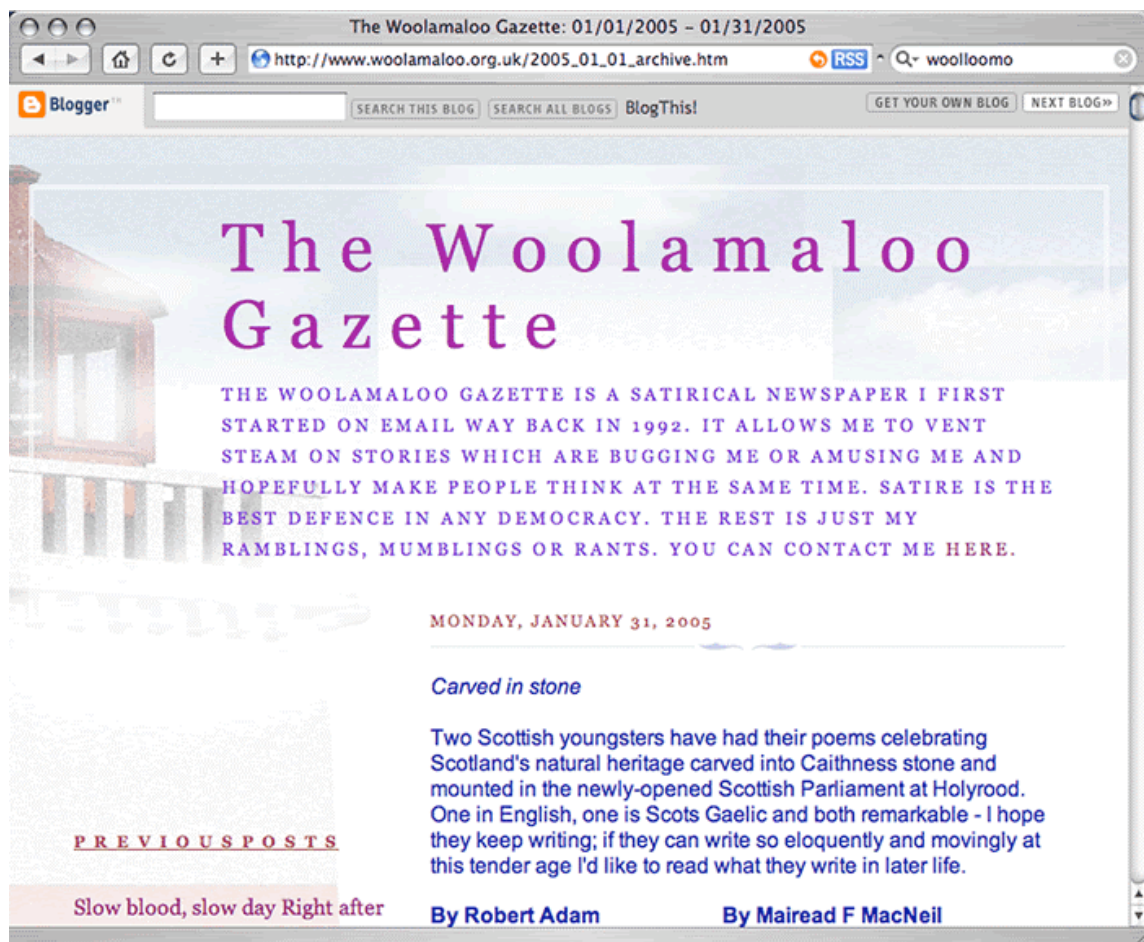
Figure 3: Gordon's blog, The Woolamaloo Gazette, a "satirical newspaper" started in 1992.

While in the media spotlight, Gordon wrote passionately about the help he had received from his union and linked his belief in organized labor to his working class ancestry. In a post entitled "United We Stand, he wrote, "previous generations of our family were miners and would never forgive me for not advocating unions." He counseled readers, "I've been a member for many years now and have often advocated membership to folk who ask – the more members then the stronger the union and the more it can ensure the welfare of the staff" (2005e).

Gordon used his situation as a platform from which to call for greater labor protections, creating embarrassment for Waterstone's, which had situated itself as a progressive, enlightened company. Coverage of Gordon's situation in *The Guardian* (Barkham, 2005) led immediately to increased traffic at The Woolamaloo Gazette. The story was then picked up by the international media and Gordon expressed his delight at receiving overwhelmingly supportive emails and comments from China, Brazil, Denmark, and Norway (J. Gordon, 2005b). Several blog visitors promised to boycott Waterstones, one reader suggested a "Hate Waterstone's Day," and others contributed tales of their own blog-related firing incidents. Using Photoshop to manipulate the press photo of Gordon in front of the Edinburgh store that had appeared on The Guardian website, an anonymous reader replaced the Waterstone's logo with "Bastardstone's" (see figure 2). A customer of the Newcastle branch wrote that Waterstone's stores are, "little more than sweatshops run by jumped-up little Hitlers who probably think The Da Vinci Code is a great novel;" another customer lamented the "corporate American management style" prevalent in the service industry (J. Gordon, 2005a, 2005b, 2005e).

Other booksellers raised issues of working conditions at Waterstone's and questioned the firm's exploitative practices. A former employee called Sandy S wrote: "It appears now that those working for the chain are being taken advantage of [...] still lousy wages (£12K p.a for a senior bookseller, after eleven years?), but they think they can get away with it, because people like you love books, are knowledgeable about what you do, and want to share that enthusiasm with others. That doesn't mean that they own you!". Another employee protested, "it seems we are now all corporate drones with no voice of our own, although we'd suspected as much for a while." A Borders employee advocated use of a Livejournal-style blog to limit readers to "friends" only as a way being able to blog freely about work; a group of Waterstone's employees discussed plans to create free speech oriented book displays in stores around the country (J. Gordon, 2005a, 2005b).

Drawing on the immediacy of the blogosphere, Gordon's situation rapidly became a global conversation, with discussion emanating from a distributed group rather than from an isolated individual. As a landmark case – Gordon was the UK's first fired blogger – the Woolamaloo Gazette received considerable mainstream media attention and stimulated broad-based discussion about labor rights, freedom of speech, and the failure of corporate management to nurture the intellectual and creative development of employees. The conversation was not sustained over a long period; the social connections generated among the participants were relatively ephemeral, yet the incident demonstrated the distributed power of bloggers to mobilize opposition to management actions. Whereas Burawoy (1979) illustrates the use of periodic crackdowns to contain oppositional and shirking behavior non-disruptively within the firm, Gordon's case – using networked technology – effortlessly transcended the workplace control framework

and connected to a wider community of workers and consumers. The ensuing discussion

confirmed the presence, in corporate workplaces, of educated employees ready to engage

in the kind of critical discourse suggested by Gouldner (1979), who emphasized, in

particular, the readiness of the new working class to mobilize in order to protect free

speech. While the dialogue surrounding Gordon's case could be to some extent

characterized as the type of individualized and apolitical venting highlighted by Kunda

(1992), Wilmott (1993a), and others, readers clearly used Gordon blog as a means to

coordinate and rally around more formal types of protest, albeit in a relatively isolated

historical moment.

Technology Policies With Teeth: Employers Respond to Bloggers

In reacting to the blogging phenomenon, employers have followed a learning curve that mirrors wider developments in workplace culture and corporate ideology. There has been an increased demand for surveillance of employee computer use and efforts to establish written guidelines to discourage anonymous blogging about work. But some companies are also pursuing an alternate strategy – a cautious corporate embrace of blogging, with some firms going as far as encouraging their employees to blog under the banner of openness and transparency.

Firms are stepping up monitoring of Internet use amid calls from technological management consultants such as the ePolicy Institute's Nancy Flynn to use technological surveillance tools to "battle people problems" (American Management Association, 2005). According to the 2005 Electronic Monitoring and Surveillance Survey conducted by the American Management Association (AMA) and the ePolicy Institute (American Management Association, 2005), "companies increasingly are putting teeth into their technology policies," with 26% firing workers for misusing the Internet and 76% monitoring workers' website connections. According to guidelines on Internet and email policies, produced by ACAS, similar trends are identifiable in the UK (Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service, 2004).

In addition to technical solutions, firms are also being pressured to institute blogging policies that add to existing policies on Internet and email use. The AMA survey reports that 89% of firms inform employees that their Web usage is being tracked but that only 20% had policies on operating personal blogs on company time. Law

experts argue that having a policy in place can protect an employer from appearing

heavy-handed. In February 2005, UK employment law firm Cobbetts (2005) advised

employers, "failure to have such a policy in place may result in claims that sanctions

imposed are too draconian and may lay an employer open to claims in the employment

tribunal."

A Tentative Embrace: Corporate Blogging

While surveillance and guidelines restricting or banning blogging can seem like

simple solutions, big problems arise when these policies clash ideologically with

management strategies that are based on building trust and openness among staff and

supervisors, and nurturing self-motivation rather than closely supervising workers.

Companies increasingly claim to honor workers' ability to set their own work schedule,

and social activity that blurs the boundaries between work and play have long been

tolerated in many white collar workplaces (Bunting, 2004; Hochschild, 1997; Ross,

2002). A corporate policy that curbs freedoms can lower employee morale and threaten to

burst the ideological bubble of the caring, humane workplace.

During 2004 and 2005 an alternate corporate strategy emerged that is in some

ways a tacit acknowledgement of the ideological limitation of workplace policies that

result in high profile fired bloggers. This new strategy has been promoted by David Sifry,

Founder and CEO of the influential company Technorati, which monitors trends in the

blogosphere and advises business of commercial opportunities. In October 2004, Sifry

announced in his blog, "there is still a tremendous opportunity for forward-thinking

companies and management to have a significant positive impact on their public

perception by encouraging an enlightened blogging policy, encouraging openness both

within and outside of the organization" (Sifry, 2004b). Sifry announced that forward-

thinking companies such as Sun Microsystems were encouraging their workers to have

personal blogs, while other firms, including Boeing and General Motors, were setting up

corporate blogs where they invite employees to post authoritatively on new developments

and products. This news marked a new corporate embrace of blogging, with firms

competing to adopt these "enlightened" strategies that are in line with the latest

management thinking.

In this spirit of open embrace of employee blogging, several companies, including

IBM and Yahoo, encouraged public posting and discussion of their blogging policies,

taking a high profile stance on the issue. Writing in May 2005, IBM employee and

blogger James Snell vaunted IBM's policy as a triumph against anonymous blogging,

noting the company's full endorsement of IBM bloggers and its full involvement of

employees in devising and formalizing the policy:

> IBM today is publishing an announcement on its Intranet site encouraging all
> 320,000+ employees world wide to consider engaging actively in the practice of
> "blogging" […] The core principles – written by IBM bloggers over a period of
> ten days using an internal wiki – are designed to guide IBMers as they figure out
> what they're going to blog about so they don't end up like certain notable ex-
> employees of certain notable other companies. (Snell, 2005)

Snell scornfully dismisses as "crap," a CNN article offering advice on anonymous

workblogging, and reminds IBMers, "this isn't a policy that IBM is imposing upon us – it

is a commitment that we all have entered into together." The guidelines themselves

emphasize IBM's corporate values of "open exchange and learning" and "trust and

personal responsibility in all relationships," and encourage IBM bloggers to identify

themselves and their role in the company. Company-hosted blogs are to be written in a

way that "adds value" to the company, and, while the guidelines indicate that what

employees do outside of work is their own business, they are cautioned that, "activities in

or outside of work that affect your IBM job performance, the performance of others, or IBM's business interests are a proper focus for company policy" (Snell, 2005).

Anonymous Blogging Continues

Corporate blogging has been received skeptically by many in the blogging community and the entry of corporations is seen as antithetical to the blogosphere's not-for-profit ethos. In the *Daily Telegraph*, James Hall (2005) captured this reaction commenting that, "The very point of blogs is that they are open and honest. But how can blogs that have been sanctioned by a company be objective, wary bloggers ask." Amid proposals that employees should gain permission from their employer before starting their blog, *The Guardian*'s Patrick Butler (2005) argued that employer-sanctioned workblogs by definition lack a satirical edge that makes them so capable of revealing truths and perspectives that cannot be gained elsewhere.

In 2005 there was a surge in management seminars and conferences aimed at providing techniques in which companies can turn blogging from a threat into an opportunity, but those who are hoping to profit from the blogosphere continue to tread carefully, not wishing to repeat mistakes such as the "Raging Cow" episode where trendy young bloggers were recruited to blog about a new Dr Pepper/Seven-Up-owned drink, resulting in accusations of underhand practice and a boycott of the drink by annoyed bloggers (Ireland, 2003). The mainstream media continued to air concerns that an employer-sanctioned blog is no substitute for one written in complete freedom. As Jeremy Blachman who was 'outed' in December 2004 as the author of very popular blog *Anonymous Lawyer* argued in an August 2005 *New York Times* Op-Ed column:

> Now that everyone can publish online, we can get these incredible glimpses into worlds we might otherwise never get to see. People across the world can share

stories, commiserate and connect with each other. Potential employees can see beyond the marketing pitches. (Blachman, 2005)

The promotion of corporate blogging by David Sifry, James Snell, and other supporters, has been met by a counter-thrust from non-profit organizations and individual bloggers devoted to anonymous blogging. In April 2005, The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF, http://www.eff.org), a US-based nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting Internet freedoms, published its guide, "How to Blog Safely about Work or Anything Else" (2005a) which clearly states EFF's support for anonymous blogging and provides concrete advice on how workers can continue to blog without revealing their identity.

The EFF guide describes blogs as "personal telephone calls crossed with newspapers," and counsels bloggers not to give away telling details about their workplace, as well as strongly advising against blogging while at work due to the high probability of being detected. It also outlines anonymizing technologies and services, such as Tor, Invisiblog, and Anonymous Surfing software, which conceal the IP address of a computer, potentially helping bloggers to elude surveillance efforts. Such efforts serve as a reminder that blogging technology will morph continually, and that blogs themselves will probably ultimately be replaced by other technologies. As Internet-enabled cellphones become the norm, reliance on workplace networks in order to blog from work is no longer a necessity, and new developments such as "microblogging" (see Twitter, http://www.twitter.com/) are taking advantage of SMS text capabilities and are driven by postings from mobile phones rather than computers.

EFF has also issued popular FAQs that explain bloggers' legal rights, reminding non-unionized US employees that in most states they are hired "at will," a status that

affords workers very few protections from being fired at the employer's whim. The Labor

Law FAQ (2005b) informs US-based bloggers that, under the First Amendment, they

cannot be fired for talking about unionizing or (so long as they notify the appropriate

regulatory body first) for whistle blowing, and it explains the protected category of

speech called "concerted speech," where two or more people may legally blog about their

working conditions, such as the pay scale or vacation policy without fear of retaliation.

By reminding employees of their at-will status and their right to organize, EFF is

reaffirming the role of unions in protecting workers' rights and reinvigorating labor

questions that may previously have seemed irrelevant or anachronistic to many workers.

Although EFF's guides are focused on US employment law, the organization's efforts

toward protecting the right to anonymous and free speech on the Internet have generated

heavy interest and support in the UK, highlighting the need for a similar organization

specializing in UK issues and triggering an Internet campaign that led to the formation of

the UK-based Open Rights Group (http://www.openrightsgroup.org) in November 2005

(Doctorow, 2005).

Figure 4: Graphic promoting the Electronic Frontier Foundation's resources protecting bloggers' rights (2005).

As well as supporting existing organizations, individual bloggers who want to protect the right to blog anonymously about work have responded by forming new coalitions and information nodes. San Francisco-based writer Curt Hopkins' posting, "Statistics on Fired Bloggers" (Hopkins, 2006), on his blog *Morpheme Tales*

(http://morphemetales.blogspot.com), which invites readers to provide updates and

corrections, has become a focal point for collecting information on people around the

world who have lost their jobs because of blogging. Another blogger-organized focal

point was the (still live but no longer updated) *Anonymous Work Blogs Blogring*.

(http://anonworkblogs.blogspot.com**),** which lists links to anonymous blogs about work

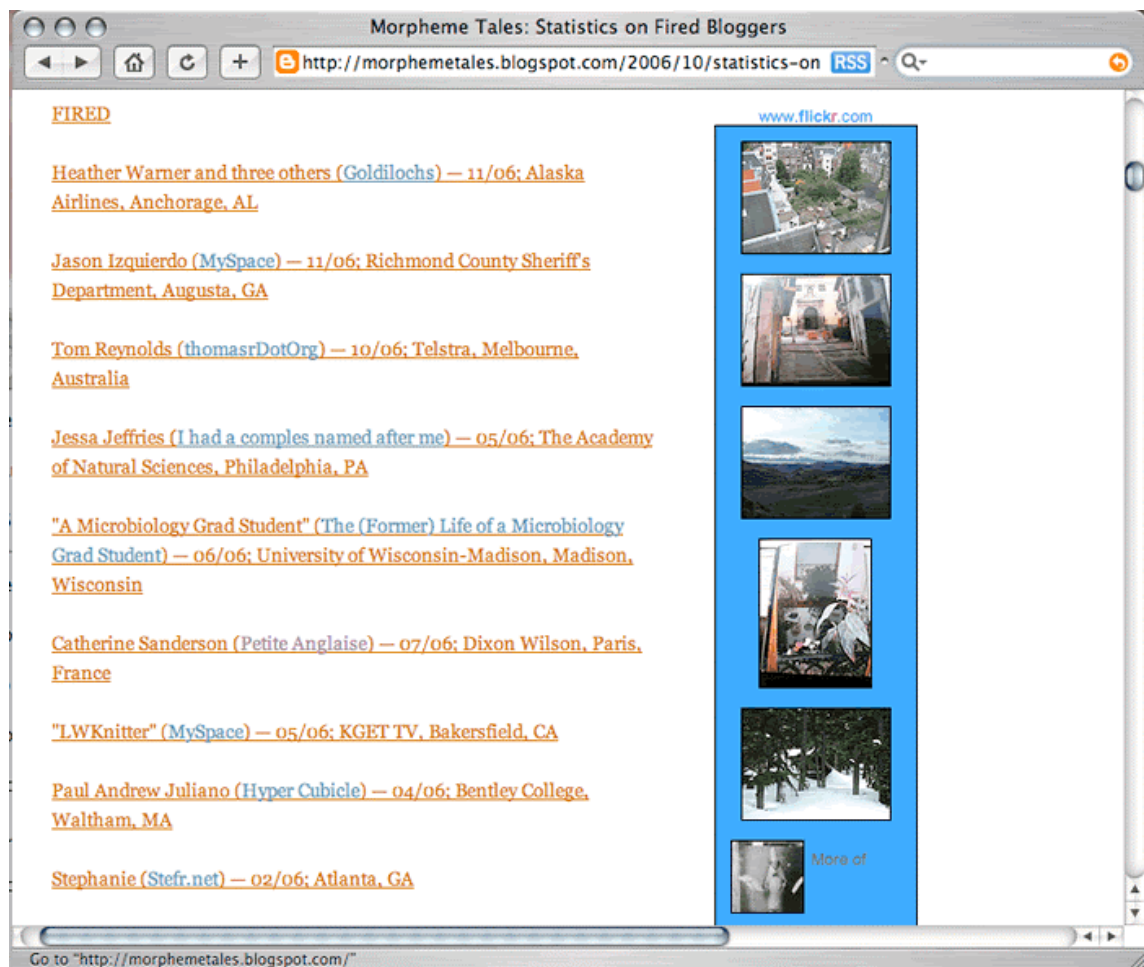and encourages each person listed to place a link from their blog to the next person in the

ring.

Figure 5: A list of fired bloggers from the Morpheme Tales blog, which has tracked blogger who are fired or disciplined since 2004.

Throughout the blogosphere, many bloggers have posted their own individual

reactions and manifestos related to the firing of anonymous workbloggers and other

related blogging controversies, often linking to or commenting on similar postings on

each others' blogs, and creating a global dialogue that spreads news about and reactions

to the latest developments. While this dialogue encompasses many opposing viewpoints,

it also nurtures a sense of community, however heterogeneous and disparate, that elevates

employee concerns above the individual level and creates the potential for exchange and

organization among those who support anonymous blogging.

Caution and Renewed Commitment: Anonymous Bloggers Cover Their Tracks

For those members of the blogging community who write irreverently or critically

about their work, it has been difficult to avoid the warnings and cautionary tales about

fired bloggers and some have responded to the warnings by stepping back and

reevaluating their practice. Dan2, a blogger in the north of England, describes how he has

reacted to the new warnings with a mix of caution and renewed commitment:

> One thing I don't write about now, although I used to, is my work. I had written a series of posts, starting out quite harmless, but ending up a lot more risky- there was one all about racist remarks made by a colleague, one comparing a visiting VIP visitor from company HQ to a particularly self-important Roman Emperor, and another about my unwillingness to take on a move to another team because, among other things, it sounded a bit too much like hard work and I would have less time to devote to the blog. I started to worry about being found out (it would at that time have only taken a Google search for my name) so one day took them all down. But those stories are all just in hibernation really and the day will come when they reappear in some untraceable online place – I even have the title of my new blog all worked out. (personal communication, November 11, 2005)

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[2] Name changed to protect this blogger's identity

Dan has been alarmed at the prospect that blogging might threaten his livelihood but he hasn't given up hope of continuing once he has covered his tracks better.

Eluding detection based on the content of their blog is an ongoing challenge for anonymous workbloggers. The Google search engine added blog searchability in September 2005 (Sifry, 2005), making it increasingly difficult for bloggers to hide in obscurity. Posting content that does not reveal too much of a blogger's identity is a craft that demands constant alertness and artistry, especially for writers devoted to conveying realistic dialogue and events from their daily lives. Many bloggers use fictionalizing techniques that remove their anecdotes and stories from the actual events that inspired them. UK blogger, Tim[3], who writes *A Free Man in Preston* (http://afreemaninpreston.blogspot.com)*,* refers to this practice as using his "blogger's license" to "exaggerate here, caricature there, mess about with time frames when it suits me" (Tim, 2005i), leaving readers guessing about how much is truth and how much is conjured from Tim's rich imagination, and reminding his audience that anything they read on his blog may be pure fantasy. Carefully covering his tracks, Tim is one of many anonymous bloggers who are committed to continuing to blog anonymously and whose art has perhaps gained a certain caché from the corporate blogging phenomenon with which it exists in stark contrast.

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[3] the alias this anonymous blogger uses in his postings.

The Case of Petite Anglaise

In July 2006, well after the first wave of fired blogger incidents had come and gone, and the organizational response to blogging had developed into the controlled acceptance strategy outlined above, a new firing incident came to light, which returned the discussion of blogging and employee freedoms to the headlines. Popular blogger "Petite Anglaise," an Englishwoman residing in Paris, was sacked in April 2006 after her employer found out about her blog and accused her of blogging on company time and potentially bringing the firm into disrepute through her writings. Petite, whose real name (as revealed by the press) is Catherine Sanderson, worked as a bilingual secretary for the accounting firm Dixon Wilson but she had never identified the firm or made reference to the accounting industry in her blog, and wrote only very occasionally about incidents at work.

The sacking of Petite was in some ways anachronistic – her firm was notably conservative and was clearly oblivious to the learning curve that many organizations have followed with regard to the negative publicity that could result from firing an employee for blogging. However, the case also represented a maturing of the blogging community and confirmed the persistence of anonymous workblogging in spite of corporate attempts to subsume or control it. Petite's case highlights widespread attachment in the blogging community to principles of free speech and the right to maintain a detached and even critical orientation to the labor process. Her firing, and the explosive media and Internet coverage that it generated, exerted a "sleeping giant" effect, communicating the possibility that any employee could be connected to a powerful and vocal network of supporters. The case also highlighted knowledge workers' dedication to making use of workplace resources and networks for their own creative projects, pursuing self-

fulfillment through avenues other than their formal work duties. Further, *Petite Anglaise*

illustrated the power of creative writing itself in cultivating a following, creating a sense

of intimacy among a diffuse group of readers, and nurturing countercultural values that

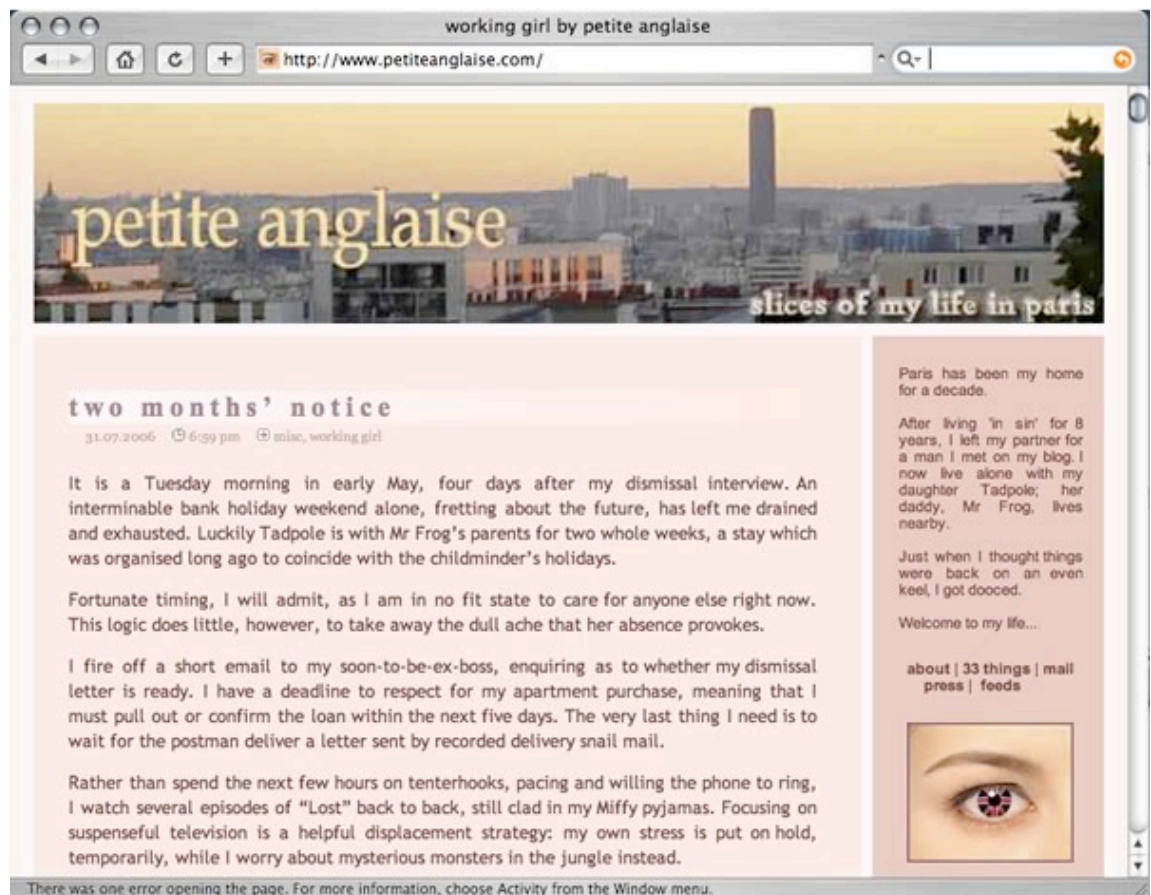clash subtly with the notion of job commitment.

Figure 6: One of Petite's postings from July 2006, telling the story of her firing and its aftermath.

Catherine Sanderson started writing *Petite Anglaise* in July 2004 after reading about blogging on *The Guardian*'s website and following links to blogs such as Belle de Jour, the now discontinued blog of a London call girl (Anglaise, 2007a). Writing anonymously as "Petite," Sanderson's blog chronicles her personal struggles in raising a child, coping with the ends and beginnings of relationships, and trying to sustain a survive financially in the French capital. It was already a relatively popular blog before the firing incident, commanding a readership of about 3000 visitors per day (Randall, 2006), but this number swelled ten-fold to 30,000 a day immediately afterwards (Frost, 2006).

In the entire history of Sanderson's blog there are only a handful of anecdotes that relate to workplace events and characters – Petite gives the number as 12 out of 384 posts (Anglaise, 2006a). In one, entitled, "titillation," she describes the accidental baring of her cleavage during a videoconference hookup, making reference to the conservatism and sexism that prevails at the firm. In a passage that was later heavily referred to in the press, she writes of one of the firm's partners: "This other boss is very old school. He wears braces and sock suspenders (although I don't have any firsthand experience of those), stays in gentlemen's clubs when in London, and calls secretaries 'typists'" (Anglaise, 2005b). Petite also intimated in her blog that she had taken time off from work on a false excuse in order to spend time in a hotel room with her new lover (Anglaise, 2005a). And, as became important in the legal case against her, it was evident from the timestamps on her blog entries that she had blogged during work hours.

Petite wrote about her firing in July 2006 and was immediately bombarded with comments from readers, provoking interest from a Paris-based *Daily Telegraph* reporter

who broke the story in the mainstream press, quoting Sanderson as taking a moral stand, "defining the boundaries between personal and professional activities, where the line should be drawn for bloggers who touch on the events of their working life in their writing" (Randall, 2006). Multiple press and radio interviews followed and the story was picked up by Associated Press and syndicated worldwide. In *The Guardian*, Petite described herself as a "competent and dependable worker" (Sanderson, 2007), commenting in *The Times* that she objected to otherwise good workers being sanctioned for their blogging activity (Bremner, 2007). In the following months, she was given opportunities to write opinion pieces for *The Guardian* (Sanderson, 2007) and *New Statesman,* and secured a book deal worth close to a million dollars with Penguin (Rickett, 2006) and a memoir based on her blog is due for release in 2008. In March 2007, Petite won a legal victory against her employer, when a French labor tribunal granted an unfair dismissal verdict and ordered her firm to pay 44,000 Euros in damages. She told *The Guardian* that she hoped her case would, "send out reassuring signals to the millions of people blogging in France" (B. Johnson, 2007).

In the aftermath of Petite's firing, regular followers of the blog were joined by new readers who had heard of Petite's plight, and the slew of comments immediately following the media publicity overloaded the server that hosted Sanderson's blog, marking her extreme popularity (Anglaise, 2006a). The comment box at *Petite Anglaise* became a gathering place for people who wanted to offer their sympathies, express their support for free speech, and report on how the story had been covered in their local media. Readers from places as far afield as Estonia and China posted comments about how the story had reached their local and national newspapers. While not all comments

were supportive, the vast majority were, leading a reader called O. to comment, "there are literally thousands of readers supporting you," while a visitor called Monty chimed in with, "You represent the people and to all our eyes you are perceived as the victim" (Anglaise, 2006b).

More specifically, Petite's blog became a site where other workers talked about their own fears about blogging from work. Several "Dooced" bloggers commented about their own firing episodes, and others posted information about employee rights, including the ACAS (Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service) Internet guidelines (2006) and the EFF guide to anonymous blogging (2005). A reader called Sydneysnider commented, "hope everyone reading this is unionised" (Anglaise, 2006b). Some readers lamented the increased surveillance that bloggers faced at work – as the labor tribunal commenced, a reader called Morgan wrote, "This e-climate of terror will have most of us censoring ourselves for protection, even though we write because we believe in free speech and rights to personal, non-corporate opinion" (Anglaise, 2007b). Among the comments, were several demonstrations of solidarity with Petite in asserting the right to blog from work, with visitors commenting that they were reading through the comments and posting from work on company computers in their own workplaces. According to one commenter, Petite's fans temporarily effected a Google bomb (influencing the ranking of a given page in results returned by the Google search engine), associating the search term "Dixon Wilson" to the Wikipedia definition for stupidity (Anglaise, 2006a).

Although most of the comments were one-off remarks, at times, readers responded to each other, building on previous comments and bringing forth diverse viewpoints amidst the largely supportive tone of the discussion. In response to the

tribunal result, a reader called Paul Reichel interrupted the generally supportive vein of opinion by posting an opposing view: "You used their time and their facilties [sic] - both of which they and not you had paid for." A debate ensued, with some readers defending Petite's right to blog on company time or to be given fair warning rather than an immediate dismissal, while a smaller number upheld the view that Petite's employer was partly in the right.

The incidents surrounding Petite's firing and subsequent legal proceedings, gave her readers – many of whom were bloggers themselves – an opportunity to reflect on their orientation to their organizational role and to elevate their acts of creative self-expression onto a plane in which the reclamation of time and resources from the labor process became a communal rather than an individual act. Petite's high profile case elevated the everyday acts of resistance undertaken by her audience, imbuing the reading of blogs on company time with moral and political significance. Through engagement in the discussion, readers were able to affirm their ideological distance from corporate values, renewing their commitment to writing anonymously on their own blogs. Regular readers who had been attracted to the blog by the quality of Petite's writing, became united around shared values – such as a lack of job commitment – that were subtly present in the blog before the incident but became overt after the firing. By demonstrating their intellectual sophistication – expressing contempt for tabloid newspapers, for example – Petite's readers attempted to distinguish themselves as educated, critical thinkers, ready to contribute their ideas and analysis to the case.

While Petite's readers made no move toward any kind of long-term political organization, their willingness to engage in discussion about the labor process

demonstrated, in particular, a creative need for unfettered self-expression and a

commitment to borrowing time from the work day for dialogue and artistic endeavors.

Research on workblogs has indicated that bloggers do not identify their activity as

resistance (Richards, 2007), and has highlighted the personal nature of the phenomenon

(Lenhart & Fox, 2006), emphasizing that most anonymous workbloggers blog as an act

of creative self-expression rather than an act of defiance. Amidst the media furore over

her firing, Sanderson referred to her blog as a personal endeavor, yet acknowledged its

inherently public nature: "I've often thought it's a little like being an actor on the stage

and not being able to see the audience because of the lights. You can kind of forget that

they're there and just write for yourself" (Frost, 2006). Her blog underscores the

connection between creative writing and resistance, helping to unravel the seeming

contradiction between writing that is intimate and personal yet able, albeit ephemerally,

to precipitate large-scale political mobilization in support of worker's rights. In the long-

term, Petite's blog, and others like it, helps members of the blogging community to

strengthen their adherence to iconoclastic values, making subtle connections between

their writing and a literary culture that rejects traditional career values and fuels its

members' individual efforts to limit their participation in a labor process that they find

alienating.

Anonymous Workblogging as Creative Refusal

Critics of corporate culture such as Arlie Hochschild (1997), Andrew Ross (2002)

and, in the UK, Madeleine Bunting (2004), have argued that the colonization of workers'

emotions and creative impulses in the service of salaried time has led to overwork, time-

scarcity, and neglected families and communities. Looking at workers in a high tech

environment who are simultaneously seduced by the company culture yet wary of its encroachment into their private space, Gideon Kunda (1992) adds an important and subtle dimension to this analysis, focusing on how white collar workers negotiate their organizational identity as a tightrope walk that permits some distance from their role yet, in the absence of a compelling alternative, returns them to the organization as their principal source of affirmation. Echoing Kunda, Hugh Willmott has emphasized the confusion and emptiness that workers face when they try to resist corporate culture (1993a).

Thompson and Ackroyd (1995) have criticized Kunda for promoting a "Foucauldian turn" in organizational sociology that forecloses the possibility of resistance in the knowledge workplace. They advocate a revival of academic research into informal and subtle forms of resistance. The mainstream media, in covering high profile fired blogger cases, has often treated anonymous workblogging as a political phenomenon, characterizing bloggers as recalcitrant employees engaged in conscious acts of rebellion. However, recent studies of blogging have cautioned against regarding the workblogging phenomenon as a conscious act of defiance and have downplayed the idea of blogs as public forums for rhetoric and debate (Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Richards, 2007). Yet, analysis of the relationship between personal creative writing and political mobilization in the blogosphere reveals a subtle yet concrete process of ideological convergence around anti-corporate, anti-work, and generally iconoclastic values that represent a firm and sustained detachment by bloggers and their readers from the labor process in which they are engaged.

Anonymous blogging, which allows workers to vent their frustrations and distance themselves from corporate culture using highly fictionalized identities, represents, on the one hand, a form of role-distancing that enables workers to accommodate value differences and express feelings of alienation without disrupting their job performance. The containment of blogging through periodic tightening of Internet surveillance and institution of blogging guidelines has been effective in stifling workplace and work-themed blogging. The controlled persistence of workblogging suggests Burawoy's (1979) analysis of the creation of consent to the capitalist labor process through carefully managed freedoms that make workers perceive the labor process as a game that they are winning.

However, as recent high-profile workblogging controversies have illustrated, anonymous blogging is a potentially disruptive, highly networked phenomenon that makes use of rapidly evolving Internet technologies to create new opportunities for dialogue and action. Efforts to suppress anonymous blogging by increasing surveillance and discouraging the practice through written policies have encountered ideological limitations, since they clash with corporate culture based on employee freedom and self-management. These limitations have been partly surmounted by a powerful new corporate strategy of embracing blogging as an integral aspect of the corporate culture and encouraging employees to blog openly and candidly about their work.

Yet, although this "corporate blogging" strategy has garnered vocal support from prominent employees of influential organizations and has been hailed as a moral victory over anonymous blogging, employer-sanctioned blogs fail to accommodate the continued need for unfettered critical distancing from the labor process.

Ultimately, the workblogging controversy has raised questions about whether negativity and irreverence can be tolerated in a new corporate culture that attempts to incorporate workers' whole selves into its organism. Anonymous blogs about work, and blogs written surreptitiously on company time, expose the fact that even good employees feel resentful at having their time colonized by the company, that they often find their work and the goals of the organization deeply meaningless or even troubling, that they do not trust that the company cares about them and see the threat of downsizing beneath the caring company jargon. Blogs lament the demise of union protections, and they cry out for health benefits and vacation time. Blogs start and maintain conversations on a global level that transcends organizational boundaries, going beyond the individualized and easily neutralized resistance identified by Kunda.

As creative writers and satirists rather than pamphleteers, Dooce, Joe Gordon, and Petite Anglaise are not labor activists engaged in a campaign to directly impact the labor process. Yet their actions as high profile bloggers help to create a popular culture of resistance that is based in the everyday actions of workers who are not particularly invested in their jobs or the companies they work for. Bloggers such as Petite Anglaise, the fired secretary turned millionaire, become iconic representations of disengagement from the organization. On the one hand, famous fired bloggers become, like Horkheimer and Adorno's (2001) stenographer turned starlet – part of a projected fantasy world that obscures exploitation and generates consent. Yet, on the other hand, their stories demonstrate and inspire authentic resistance, encouraging workers to use the technics of the knowledge workplace to support the idea of refusal (Marcuse, 1991). While not aligned with traditional labor organizing, workblogs and the interactive discussion they

precipitate nevertheless suggest polyphonic models of labor activism and social change

(Carter et al., 2003).

The subversive everyday actions of bloggers and blog-readers build and sustain a

popular culture of resistance. As conveyed by James Scott's (1987) work on peasant

resistance and de Certeau's (2002) invocation of *La Perruque*, these actions are linked to

social change and emancipation without necessarily following the trajectory of an

organized popular movement. Most importantly, the writings of bloggers confirm that

being a good and dependable knowledge worker does not denote ideological compliance.

As Scott writes, "If, behind the façade of behavioral conformity imposed by elites, we

find innumerable, anonymous acts of resistance, so also do we find, behind the façade of

symbolic and ritual compliance, innumerable acts of ideological resistance" (304).

In spite of the very real fear of losing their jobs because of publicly declaring their

feelings, bloggers continue to write critically about their work, taking advantage of

technological developments to reclaim time and resources for their writing, employing

creative subterfuge in order to protect their identities, and building alliances that protect

their legal rights. The networks they form are diffuse and are defined around an interest

in the creative process and self-expression rather than overt labor organizing or political

activism. Lacking the kind of sustained organization necessary to demand and effect

systematic change, their activities may actually promote consent, acting as an employee

safety valve that actually promotes the stability of the capitalist system. Yet blogs, as

sites for unfettered global dialogue and creative self-development, cultivate an awareness

of contradictions within the labor process, nurture opposition to the status quo, and

cultivate the belief that another world is possible.