

Technology Policies With Teeth: Can Recalcitrant Workbloggers Be Co-opted and Controlled?

Abigail Schoneboom, Ph.D.
The City University of New York, USA

Running Head: Tech Teeth. Schoneboom
Word Count: 6,256 words

Contact information:

Dr Abigail Schoneboom
Assistant Professor of Sociology
(718) 482-6048, aschoneboom@lagcc.cuny.edu

Department address:

Department of Social Science
LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York (CUNY)
31-10 Thomson Avenue, Long Island City, NY11101, USA

ABSTRACT

When the Edinburgh branch of Waterstone's fired bookseller Joe Gordon in 2005 for comments made on his blog, *The Woolamalo Gazette*, the company was subject to hydra-like retaliation from the blogging community. By firing a blogger in order to remove what it perceived as a potential threat to its reputation, the company found itself under an intense and critical media spotlight. When Gordon's blog became a *cause célèbre*, discussion became focused on labor issues, highlighting bookstore workers' sense of vulnerability and revealing cracks in a corporate ideology that promises unproblematic self-actualisation through the labor process. Meanwhile, savvy corporations have begun to embrace blogging, promoting employer-sanctioned blogs and open discourse between workers and their supervisors as the way forward.

Analysing postings and discussions from Gordon's blog, as well as examining media coverage of the incident, this study sets from Burawoy's study of how consent is created at the point of production, asking whether the Internet represents an opportunity for worker resistance to override traditional containment mechanisms. The events on Gordon's blog are consistent with the idea that collective resistance has not been foreclosed by corporate culturism (Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995, p. 619). Gordon's satirical posting about his boss was not an instrumental part of an incipient labor organising campaign (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995; Taylor & Bain, 2003) but the events it precipitated created a rallying point for like-minded workers. This study attempts to draw out the potential and limitations of this type of resistance, bearing in mind recent studies of employee blogging that downplay the activist potential of the practice (Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Richards, 2007).

I argue that although Gordon's blog was not a forum for resistance before the firing, it became one during the firing and its aftermath. Although the events were fueled by relatively informal joking (such as the word "Bastardstone's," which spread rapidly through the blogosphere), the media impact was greatly facilitated by a preexisting commitment to progressive political values, such as the right to free speech, that was shared by Gordon and his readers. Following Gordon's subsequent movements -- he won his appeal against Waterstone's but had already been headhunted by specialist bookstore Forbidden Planet International to run the company blog -- this study reflects on the ability of management ideology to mutate and absorb dissent. However, I uphold that, via employee blogs such as *The Woolamalo Gazette*, concerted employee resistance is nevertheless asserted within discrete historical moments that can build social momentum in the "space between unions" (Fantasia & Voss, 2004). Although moments of synthesis between the blogging community and the mainstream media are short-lived, and bloggers are unlikely to coalesce into a centrally organized social movement, their dynamic and energetic contribution to the debate about the labor process constitutes a healthy undercurrent of dissent that facilitates the work of the labor movement.

Keywords: Blogging, workblogging, technology policy, fired bloggers, Woolamalo, Joe Gordon.

Introduction

In January 2005, Joe Gordon was fired from the Edinburgh branch of Waterstone's bookstore for his satirical blog, *The Woolamalo Gazette* (See Figure 1), 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 (Gordon, 2004). The incident generated energetic discussion on Gordon's blog, in which Gordon highlighted the help he was getting from his union in defending himself. The word "Bastardstone's" quickly proliferated around the Internet, helped along by mainstream media attention, including an article in *The Guardian* that upheld Gordon's free speech rights (Barkham, 2005), BBC news coverage, and public support from novelists such as Richard Morgan, who wrote letters in Gordon's defense.

Gordon is one of several fired bloggers who became *causes célèbres* in the period 2002-2006. These cases successfully raised labor and civil rights issues in a relatively high profile fashion, leading to negative publicity for employers, and giving rise to management debate about appropriate policies to deal with employee bloggers. This debate has placed management in an uncomfortable position – some of 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.

In 2005, the year of Gordon's dismissal, The American Management Association reported that many companies were "putting teeth into their technology policies," increasing surveillance, tightening rules about computer use, or prohibiting the act of blogging about one's employer (2005). However, as some of the negative media coverage of fired bloggers shows, this approach may have clashed too obviously with corporate ideologies that promote hands-off management and attempt to harmonise employee goals with those of the company. Aware of the ideological disconnect, some savvy corporations began in 2005 to embrace blogging rather than banning it, promoting employer-sanctioned blogs and open discourse between workers and their supervisors as the way forward.

This paper examines Joe Gordon's case, analysing whether this type of employee dissent can be effectively controlled or co-opted by employers. Drawing on blog data and news articles surrounding the case, it traces how management, employment law experts, and the media responded, making predictions about future developments. Theoretically, the paper sets out from Burawoy's (1979) conception of the cyclical containment of workplace rebellion, asking whether the Internet represents an opportunity for worker resistance to override traditional containment mechanisms. The paper shows that fired bloggers have demonstrated the ability to surprise management by transcending organisational boundaries and connecting prominently to mainstream media, but that the effect is relatively short-lived. Weighing the fired workblogger phenomenon against recent literature on workplace resistance and workblogging, the article considers whether bloggers can disrupt the workplace in ways that may ultimately be useful to the labor movement.

Theoretical Framework

Burawoy's (1979) work on the generation of consent at the point of production offers a useful starting point for consideration of whether today's employee bloggers can be successfully co-opted and controlled by employers. In the Chicago machine shop where his study unfolds, Burawoy observes an "enlightened" management doctrine that leaves the workers some freedom to set their own work pace. Periodically, this freedom is reined in with "crackdowns" that temporarily tighten the rules. This cyclical process "obscures and secures" the extraction of surplus value, tending to contain class struggle between management and workers within the bounds of the "game" rather than spilling over into the type of conflict where workers would challenge the legitimacy of capitalism itself.

In Burawoy's formulation, this process effectively contains employee resistance in a manner that is functional for the capitalist production process. The crackdown operates swiftly and relatively silently within the organisation, dampening labor organising tendencies and atomising workers as players in the game, who await the next round once the disciplinary phase blows over. Looking at Joe Gordon's case, this paper examines whether employee blogging represents a challenge to Burawoy's containment thesis, transforming the periodic crackdown from a quiet, internal event into a relatively explosive and negative media event.

Theorising the Woolamaloo incident, which emerged somewhat unwittingly out of the actions of an individual employee, presents some challenges. Gordon was a union member and the progressive politics he shared with many of his readers intensified the events that unfolded on his blog. The controversial postings were playful jibes about Gordon's boss that obliquely referenced the *Dilbert* cartoon, not a call to rise up or resist the employer's policies. Yet, the incident encouraged loosely coordinated discussion and action among bookstore employees that suggests a sense of solidarity against the employer.

The events on Gordon's blog are consistent with the idea that collective resistance has not been foreclosed by corporate culturism (Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995, p. 619). Gordon's satirical postings about his employer were not an instrumental part of a labor organising campaign but the events they precipitated created a rallying point for like-minded workers. The transition from joking to serious dialogue that resulted on Joe's blog, suggests previous studies of resistance (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995; Taylor & Bain, 2003) that illustrate how individualised satire coalesces into more serious organising under certain preconditions. Of particular interest is Taylor and Bain's study, which shows how, in the presence of incipient trade unionism, call centre workers use joking and satire instrumentally in building vigorous countercultures that oppose management doctrine.

Once under way, the discussions that unfolded on Joe's blog about work conditions and corporate ideology resembled an internet-enabled union campaign. The power of the internet in energising labor struggles has been captured by Carter et al.'s study of email use among the Liverpool dockers (2003) and, more recently, in Albright's account of the Justice for Janitors campaign at the University of Miami (2008). Carter et al (2003) argue that internet communication enables workers to find "a space for discourse that is not already colonised – or marginalised – by the strategies that power uses" (p. 295). For Albright, blogging and email are part of a suite of innovative tactics through which bargaining power is increased during an organising campaign, drawing on the social influence of "interconnected networks of actors at local and global levels" (2008, p. 65). However, Internet-enabled collective employee action has not been well documented outside of explicit union-centered campaigns. This paper therefore attempts to document how, via the internet, individualised satire can give rise to a more concerted form of resistance invigorating the "space between unions" (Fantasia & Voss, 2004, p. 108) in ways that are potentially useful to organised labor.

Drawing on recent literature on blogger motivations, this paper also attempts to capture the limitations of this type of resistance. As James Richards notes in his survey of anonymous workbloggers, "only a tiny minority [of workbloggers] believed their blog to be a forum for resistance" (2007, p. 28). Asked why they blog specifically about work, 28 per cent of Richards' bloggers indicate that they use their blog to "let off steam/vent/cope/stay in control," and approximately 20 per cent report that work is a "natural theme for creative writing," but only 1 per cent write about work as "resistance/defiant act" (Richards, 2007). A Pew/Internet publication (Lenhart & Fox, 2006) that reports on in-depth telephone surveys of United States bloggers conducted between July 2005 and February 2006 confirms the centrality of creative self-expression in motivating people to blog and downplays the journalistic and activist-oriented interpretations of the phenomenon. I argue that although Gordon's blog was not a forum for resistance before the firing, it became one during the events that followed, returning to its original function once the dispute was resolved. Blogs such as *The Woolamaloo Gazette* have the potential to become relatively powerful sites of resistance without having a defiant mission.

Nevertheless, as corporations seek out ways to deal with the phenomenon, instituting anti-blogging policies and – more cleverly – actively recruiting their employees to blog for the company, this particular brand of worker recalcitrance appears to be on the decline. In the closing chapter of the *Woolamaloo* incident, Gordon is recruited by rival company Forbidden Planet International to run their sci-fi book division, and he is encouraged to blog about his new employer on his own blog, as well as running the company blog (<http://www.forbiddenplanet.co.uk/blog/>). Returning to Burawoy’s framework, this study asks whether enlightened capital has merely continued the cycle of control through strategic tolerance of and clampdowns on blogging, effectively absorbing dissent without enduring any sustained disruption of the labor process.

I became acquainted with Gordon’s blog in 2004 as part of my PhD dissertation, which looks more broadly at the practice of workblogging as a creative act of resistance. At the time, I followed the story with some interest and gathered some material that I used as part of the background to my dissertation. For the current study, I downloaded all of the archived postings from *The Woolamaloo Gazette* for the period November 2004 – April 2005, during which the events unfolded. I also downloaded the comments (up to 167 per posting) that arose from each posting. In addition, I followed all of the links posted from Gordon’s blog to news and blog coverage of the incident, as well as performing my own searches for journalism and policy articles related to Joe’s firing. The blog postings, comment streams, and news articles were analysed using techniques drawn from grounded theory (Glaser & Straus, 1968), coding content related to specific issues and aligning common material with particular concepts that emerge from the blog. During the incident, I employed a virtual ethnographic stance, following the events as they unfolded on Joe’s blog, and experiencing the impact of the mainstream media coverage as it rippled through various blogs that I was following in 2005. By supplementing the blog data with various “non-blog” news sources and policy documents, I have attempted to provide an “overflowing description” of the *Woolamaloo* incident (Geertz, 1973; Sade-Beck, 2004). One obvious shortcoming of this method is that no direct participation and observation of Gordon in and around his workplace was built into the study. However, my primary interest is not in evaluating blog realities against “real life” events but rather in exploring the media effect and sense of virtual community that Joe’s blog gave rise to. As such, I have privileged *The Woolamaloo Gazette* as the center of the unfolding events, exploring its existence as a loosely cohesive and unfolding social network that is open to virtual ethnographic analysis (Beaulieu, 2004; Hakken, 1999).

Woolamaloo and the Media

By losing his job in 2005, Joe Gordon became one of a short but intriguing list of bloggers around the world who had attracted media interest by getting fired for writing blogs about their jobs. Most well known for starting the fired blogger phenomenon is a Los Angeles-based web designer (who later revealed her real name, Heather B. Hamilton) who was fired in 2002 for postings on her blog, *Dooce*, and the term “Dooiced” became quickly synonymous with being fired because of one’s weblog.

Three years after Dooce’s firing, Gordon became known as the first fired blogger in the UK¹. In mid-December 2004, he was suspended with pay and escorted from the Waterstone’s premises after being told by his manager that the comments on his blog had brought the company into disrepute. The incident is first mentioned on Joe’s blog on January 6th, the day after a disciplinary hearing at Waterstone’s headquarters where he was formally dismissed from the position he had occupied for 11 years. Several other local blogs quickly picked up the story, and by January 9th a post appeared on the very popular blog

¹ Gordon notes that two other UK bloggers informed him that they were fired earlier, but these stories were apparently not widely publicized (2005b).

Boing Boing along with a link to Joe's blog² (Doctorow, 2005), immediately increasing the number of hits on Joe's blog.

In the days that followed, Gordon found himself inundated with requests from mainstream news sources that wanted to cover the story. One of the first was *The Guardian* newspaper, which had devoted considerable journalistic resources to covering and promoting the blogosphere, and was poised to jump on the Joe Gordon story as it emerged³. A *Guardian* reporter 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). By January 12th, Gordon had done three interviews for the BBC, and the story had been written up in several UK newspapers including *The Scotsman*, and *The Herald*, as well as being featured on online news sites such as *CNET* and *Silicon.com*.

This potential for almost immediate linkage from an individual employee blog to mainstream national news sources represents a break from Burawoy's logic of containment. Waterstone's actions in cracking down on Gordon, rather than being a passing moment in the cycle of control, generated effects outside of the workplace, which threatened the company's legitimacy as an enlightened employer. Gordon's playful satire against his employer became, in the moment of conflict, a hook for generating wide media interest in the story, creating a link from playful joking to more weighty and public discussion of company policy and employee rights. This mechanism occurred relatively spontaneously, without an explicit organising agenda. Yet, as the events unfolded, Joe's blog became a site of more concerted resistance effort in defense of employee free speech. This mechanism exists in sharp contrast with Taylor and Bain's call centre study, where it was precisely the *conscious and instrumental* use of humor that led to organised resistance to management (2003). However, drawing on Taylor and Bain's insight, I argue below that Gordon's lighthearted comments were framed by a progressive and critical sensibility that predisposed his blog to become a focus for more substantive labor-related discussions and enabled it to garner sustained media attention.

Unfolding Discussions on Gordon's Blog

The discussion on Gordon's blog surrounding the firing had a certain gravitas, lent by contributions from professional writers and from Gordon's efforts to organise and analyse the communications he was receiving via email and his blog. Several novelists commented publicly, appealing for Gordon's reinstatement, and these efforts were circulated via *The Woolamaloo Gazette* as well as on the authors' own blogs. These letters dwelled on the seeming contradiction between Waterstone's actions against Gordon and the company's supposedly enlightened management philosophy. Author Richard Morgan wrote in his letter, "The action that has been taken so far bears more resemblance to the behavior of an American fast food chain than a company who deal in intellectual freedoms and the concerns of a pluralist liberal society" (quoted in (Gordon, 2005d)). Another novelist, Hal Duncan, underscored the idea that Waterstone's management practices were disingenuous:

Waterstone's seemed to offer an alternative, a company which was not part of the bullying and exploitative culture increasingly prevalent in the service industry, one where the specialist knowledge on the part of staff and management was encouraged and where real and pragmatic customer service might be expected as a result – rather than the all too familiar blank, forced

² One measure of BoingBoing's popularity is that it won the 2005 "Bloggies" (<http://2005.bloggies.com/>) for best blog of the year, which is based on votes by blog readers.

³ A pioneer in mainstream media coverage of blogging, *The Guardian* launched its own blog (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/weblog>) to report on the blogosphere in 2000 and started the "Best British Blog" award in 2002.

smile of fundamentally disinterested, disenchanted workers. (Comment posted to (Gordon, 2005b))

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” (2005e). Sifting through responses from media and blog sources, he attempted to synthesise 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? (Gordon, 2005b)

While in the media spotlight, Gordon wrote passionately about the help he had received from his union, The Retail Book Association (<http://www2.the-rba.org/>), and linked his belief in organised 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” (2005f).

Gordon expressed his delight at receiving overwhelmingly supportive emails and blog comments from China, Brazil, Denmark, and Norway (Gordon, 2005c). Several blog visitors promised to boycott Waterstone’s, 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 (Gordon, 2005b, 2005c, 2005f).

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 Live Journal-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 (Gordon, 2005b, 2005c).

As an educated and articulate employee, Gordon was able to transition seamlessly from flippant remarks against his boss to more serious analysis of his labor situation, and this pre-existing progressive consciousness worked well in garnering thoughtful input from influential writers and fellow bloggers. Taylor and Bain’s (2003) argument that satire works as an instrumental part of an organising campaign is helpful here, but the difference is that in Gordon’s case, humor was innately attached to a generalised progressive consciousness rather than to any kind of explicit union mandate with preconceived goals. The blog quickly became a gathering place for other bookstore employees and Waterstone’s customers who wished to express their opposition to the firing and share ideas for action against the company. This discussion effortlessly transcended workplace boundaries and led to public criticism and action from employees and customers, temporarily threatening the consent process.

Although the talk of concerted action against Waterstone's was somewhat diffuse, some possibility of disruption became evident, albeit in a relatively unorganised fashion. As such, Burawoy's (1979) framework for the containment of resistance was circumvented by Gordon's linkage to the broader blogosphere and to a network of likeminded workers, journalists, and booklovers. The discussion on Gordon's blog suggested the power of more explicit labor organising campaigns that have harnessed the power of the Internet (Albright, 2008; Carter et al., 2003), constituting a more forceful threat to the employer than could be instituted by an atomised worker. However, as discussed below, this threat was relatively short-lived and has been somewhat diverted by clever changes in management policy that have accompanied the blogging phenomenon.

Technology Policy and Workblogging

Before the firing incident, Gordon's blog mentioned his workplace very rarely. The post about his "sandal-wearing" boss was very much an anomaly among the usual postings about books, topical political issues, and Edinburgh life. Reflecting on why he ran *The Woolamaloo Gazette*, Gordon wrote that it was largely "for therapeutic value" and in order to entertain his friends (2005e). His blog became a forum for resistance during the upheaval, without having rebellion as its *raison d'être*, and returned to its original function after things blew over. Arguably, the discussions on Gordon's blog created lasting effects in energising campaigns for blogger free speech and spreading awareness of employee rights, but his recruitment as a "corporate blogger" for his new employer Forbidden Planet International, also points to the smartness of capital in restoring order to the system by creatively channeling dissent into more productive activity. Developments in management policy that occurred in the wake of Joe's firing highlight the limitations of this form of resistance and the need for constant innovation on the part of employees who wish to harness similar power against their employer.

Waterstone's action in firing Joe Gordon was in keeping with management trends that were emerging over the 2004-05 period, which had indicated a rise in penalties for internet misuse. In their 2005 electronic monitoring report, the American Management Association (AMA) and ePolicy Institute had noted a rise in surveillance and punitive actions taken against employees for computer misuse, estimating that 76% of US employers were monitoring employees Internet use and 26% had fired employees for misuse (2005). In the AMA report, the ePolicy Institute's executive director, Nancy Flynn, urged companies to implement Internet use policies and to "take advantage of technology tools to battle people problems" (2005). In the UK, the Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) noted similar trends (2006).

This approach was reflected in the policy discussions surrounding Joe's firing. Legal and human resource experts quoted in the media focused largely on the need for a clear policy that would inform workers such as Joe of the consequences of blogging about his employer. In *The Guardian*, Nick Lockett, a leading internet lawyer, commented, "When a company has a clear policy, it's easier for it to say its response is reasonable" (Lawson, 2005). In a similar vein, a lawyer writing for *Personnel Today*, a UK-based human resources magazine, advised employers such as Waterstone's to consider implementing a specific anti-blogging policy that would, "introduce clear limitations on the permissible contents of a blog, and reserve the right to take action if staff overstep the mark" (Brimelow, 2005).

However, Gordon's case had also illustrated that punitive action against employee bloggers could lead to explosive negative publicity, limiting the efficacy of this containment strategy. The same experts who were advocating implementation of blogging policies also raised concerns about how far an employer could go in limiting the free speech of its employees, noting the danger of action that was perceived as excessively punitive and tentatively suggesting an alternate strategy that involved nurturing employee bloggers rather than disciplining them as the way forward. Russell Brimelow noted in *Personnel Today* that policies that place limits on blogging done outside of company time could be perceived as a limit on freedom of expression and "taking a tough line on blogging" could lead to negative publicity (Brimelow, 2005). This was echoed in *The Guardian*, where Nick Lockett suggested that blogging policies should not

be too rigid, advising companies to think about harnessing blogging for their own ends: “This could be a low-cost form of marketing” (Lawson, 2005).

This insight – that blogging could be co-opted in the interests of the firm -- reflected broader industry efforts to co-opt blogging in the interests of capital. Powerful companies such as IBM, Yahoo, and Sun Microsystems had launched ambitious policies, developed by employee bloggers within the firm, that actively encouraged employees to blog about the company under a banner of openness and honesty, and this approach had been heralded by influential technology industry blogger David Sifry as “a tremendous opportunity for forward-thinking companies and management to have a significant positive impact on their public perception” (2004).

Subsequent events at *Woolamalo* point both to the successful co-option of recalcitrant bloggers and their persistence as a potentially disruptive presence in the workplace. On April 2, Gordon announced on his blog that he had appealed successfully against Waterstone’s with the help of his union, and had been offered reinstatement but had opted instead for an amicable settlement since he had already been headhunted by specialist bookstore Forbidden Planet International (FPI). Part of his new job description involved running the company weblog (<http://www.forbiddenplanet.co.uk/blog/>), which promotes science fiction books, graphic novels, and covers wider developments of interest to the FPI audience.

Gordon’s victory in winning the appeal may or may not have proceeded without the internet furore that surrounded his firing but the controversy appears to have placed significant pressure on Waterstone’s to settle in his favor. As such the case was a demonstration of how internet-based social networks can be helpful in pressuring the employer during a labor dispute (Albright, 2008). Following the incident, Gordon’s blog returned to its original focus but the postings and comments generated during the incident remain accessible and, four years later, the top hit for “Waterstone’s blog” is Joe’s posting about his firing on *The Woolamalo Gazette*⁴. Gordon used the posting about his successful appeal to once again promote his union and recommend union membership to readers who were not yet organized (Gordon, 2005a). He also linked to the newly formed Committee to Protect Bloggers (<http://committeetoprotectbloggers.org/>) a nonprofit dedicated to free speech rights and has continued to promote this organisation via his blog.

Containment or Disruption?

While Gordon’s successful action against Waterstone’s demonstrates valuable linkages between his blog, organised labor, and the free speech movement, his enthusiastic re-employment as a corporate blogger for Forbidden Planet simultaneously demonstrates the success of a business strategy that embraces blogging rather than condemning it. Following the firing, Gordon promoted organised labor, as mentioned above, but he also used his blog to announce his new job at FPI and to promote the FPI blog that he was beginning work on. For FPI, the incident presented a business opportunity, and the company benefited by employing Joe to blog in an official capacity. I argue that the Woolamalo incident lacked the sustained cohesiveness of an organised labor struggle, and that the social momentum it generated largely dissipated once Gordon’s individual case was resolved. However, in the moment of crisis, the blog became a rallying point for consciousness-raising and a place where employees in a similar work situation could discover their common commitment to social justice issues. This type of activity can only be a boon to organised labor, without being any kind of substitute for it.

The resolution of Joe’s situation illustrates how management ideology can subtly evolve in order to secure consent, and circumscribe the power of employee resistance within a specific historical moment. The *Woolamalo* incident, arguably, created such a strong effect because being fired because of one’s

⁴ Based on Google search for “Waterstone’s blog” and “Waterstones blog” conducted on February 24, 2009. The top hit is Joe’s January 6, 2005 posting, which begins with the Frederick Douglass quote, “Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want rain without thunder and lightning.”

blog was still a relatively novel media event, and blogging about one's work was also new enough that an employer was caught somewhat off-guard in responding to the situation. Returning to Burawoy's (1979) thesis of containment via periodic crackdowns, it could be argued that the *Woolamalo* story illustrates that employers have quickly become wise to the blogging phenomenon and have responded in a way that maintains the legitimacy of enlightened capital. FPI's move to headhunt Gordon symbolises the mutually successful re-routing of his enthusiasm for blogging into a profit-making activity, while industry advocacy for blogging policies that are clear-cut but not excessively draconian subtly deters transgressions, and restores to workers a sense that the "game" is being operated under fair and even favorable conditions.

According to Burawoy, employees work hard and secure the profits of their employers because work has been construed as a game that masks the class relationship of the workers under the guise of individual competition and choice. In the virtual age, employee internet use has become an intriguing component of this game, with negotiations about appropriate use extending beyond workplace computer networks to debate over how workers can express themselves in internet venues on their own time. Gordon's ability to post cheeky public comments about his employer can be loosely construed as a form of "making out" (Burawoy, 1979, p. 64) a playful means of restoring the luxury of self-determination within a somewhat alienating work environment. Waterstone's crackdown on Gordon's internet use disrupted the game in a more explosively disruptive fashion than anticipated, creating a venue where bookstore workers and their allies felt a sense of togetherness against the corporate bookstore industry. I have likened this mechanism to Taylor and Bain's (2003) analysis of the transition from joking to union organising in a call center union drive, pointing out that in Gordon's case there was no explicit instrumental goal in his initial use of satire against his boss but that an incipient orientation to the idea of labor organising helped fuel the discussions on *Woolamalo*, and garnered the attention of mainstream media.

Looking at Joe's case, employee blogging appears both easily co-opted and indicative of an intriguing new destabilising force within the labor process. This study has attempted to raise some of the distinctions between this mechanism and what has gone before, and to draw out some of the factors that influence the potential impact and limitations of individualised, internet-enabled employee resistance. *The Woolamalo Gazette* was not operated with the intention of rebelling against Waterstone's, and Gordon's contention that his blog was a venting and socialising venue rather than an act of rebellion is entirely consistent with blog studies that downplay the activist intentions of employee bloggers (Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Richards, 2007). However, the events surrounding Joe's blog illustrate that an explicit activist orientation is not a prerequisite for becoming a powerful site of resistance.

Rather, the politically progressive orientation of Gordon and his readers, and their ability to articulate and share these ideas via a publicly networked medium, came to the fore during a moment of dispute, temporarily transforming the blog into a site of struggle. Joe's new job, running the FPI blog, promised great job satisfaction by more closely aligning his job responsibilities with his natural inclinations. Nevertheless, he did not renege upon any of the views expressed during the Waterstone's incident, and continues to run *The Woolamalo Gazette* as an independent blog. The issues that were raised on his blog about work-life boundaries, bookstore salaries, and the corporatisation of independent booksellers remain, arguably, in the political consciousness of those who contributed to the discussion, and have the potential to reconverge on blogs – or other emerging media -- in powerful ways, as part of the "space between unions" (Fantasia & Voss, 2004) that this incident temporarily energised, overflowing the framework of containment and revealing intriguing new possibilities for the labor movement.

References

- Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS). (2006, September 2006). Internet and E-mail Policies. Retrieved June 22, 2007, from <http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=808>
- Albright, J. (2008). Contending Rationality, Leadership, and Collective Struggle: The 2006 Justice for Janitors Campaign at the University of Miami. *Labor Studies Journal*, 33(1), 63-80.
- American Management Association. (2005). 2005 Electronic Monitoring and Surveillance Survey--Many Companies Monitoring, Recording, Videotaping and Firing Employees. Retrieved November 30, 2006, from <http://www.amanet.org/press/amanews/ems05.htm>
- Barkham, P. (2005, January 12). Blogger Sacked for Sounding Off. *The Guardian*, p. 5.
- Beaulieu, A. (2004). Mediating Ethnography: Objectivity and the Making of Ethnographies of the Internet. *Social Epistemology*, 18(2-3), 139-163.
- Brimelow, R. (2005, 01 February). 'Blog' dismissal should prompt policy on usage. *Personnel Today*.
- Burawoy, M. (1979). *Manufacturing Consent*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Carter, C., Clegg, S., Hogan, J., & Kornberger, M. (2003). The Polyphonic Spree: The Case of the Liverpool Dockers. *Industrial Relations*, 34(4), 290-304.
- Doctorow, C. (2005). "Waterstone's fires 11-year-employee for blogging". January 9. *BoingBoing*. Retrieved February 19, 2009, from <http://www.boingboing.net/2005/01/09-week/>.
- Fantasia, R., & Voss, K. (2004). *Hard work: Remaking the American labor movement*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1968). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.
- Gordon, J. (2004). "Bad Things Recently". November 16. *The Woolamalo Gazette*. Retrieved 30 November 2006, from http://www.woolamalo.org.uk/2004_11_01_archive.htm.
- Gordon, J. (2005a). "A press release from my union, the RBA". April 2. *The Woolamalo Gazette*. Retrieved 23 February 2009, from http://www.woolamalo.org.uk/2005_04_01_archive.htm.
- Gordon, J. (2005b). "Busy Day". January 12. *The Woolamalo Gazette*. Retrieved June 14, 2007, from http://www.woolamalo.org.uk/2005_01_01_archive.htm.
- Gordon, J. (2005c). "Latest Links". January 13. *The Woolamalo Gazette*. Retrieved June 15, 2007, from http://www.woolamalo.org.uk/2005_01_01_archive.htm.
- Gordon, J. (2005d). "No title". January 10. *The Woolamalo Gazette*. Retrieved 14 June 2007 from http://www.woolamalo.org.uk/2005_01_01_archive.htm.
- Gordon, J. (2005e). "The Power of Communication". January 11. *The Woolamalo Gazette*. Retrieved June 14, 2007, from http://www.woolamalo.org.uk/2005_01_01_archive.htm.
- Gordon, J. (2005f). "United We Stand". January 13. *The Woolamalo Gazette*. Retrieved 30 November 2006, from http://www.woolamalo.org.uk/2005_01_01_archive.htm.
- Hakken, D. (1999). *Cyborgs@Cyberspace?: An Ethnographer Looks to the Future*. New York: Routledge.
- Lawson, R. (2005). UK firms warned over employee blogs. *The Guardian*.

- Lenhart, A., & Fox, S. (2006). *Bloggers: A Portrait of the Internet's New Storytellers*. Pew Internet and American Life Project.
- Richards, J. (2007). *Unmediated Workplace Images from the Internet: An Investigation of Workblogging*. Paper presented at the 25th International Labour Process Conference.
- Rodrigues, S. B., & Collinson, D. L. (1995). Having Fun? Humour as Resistance in Brazil. *Organization Studies*, 16(5), 739-768.
- Sade-Beck, L. (2004). Internet Ethnography: Online and Offline. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(2), np.
- Sifry, D. (2004). "Oct 2004 State of the Blogosphere: Corporate Bloggers". October 17. Sifry's Alerts. Retrieved 30 November 2006, from <http://www.sifry.com/alerts/archives/000390.html>.
- Taylor, P., & Bain, P. (2003). 'Subterranean Worksick Blues': Humour as Subversion in Two Call Centres. *Organization Studies*, 24(9), 1487-1509.
- Thompson, P., & Ackroyd, S. (1995). All Quiet on the Workplace Front? A Critique of Recent Trends in British Industrial Sociology. *Sociology*, 29(4), 615-633.

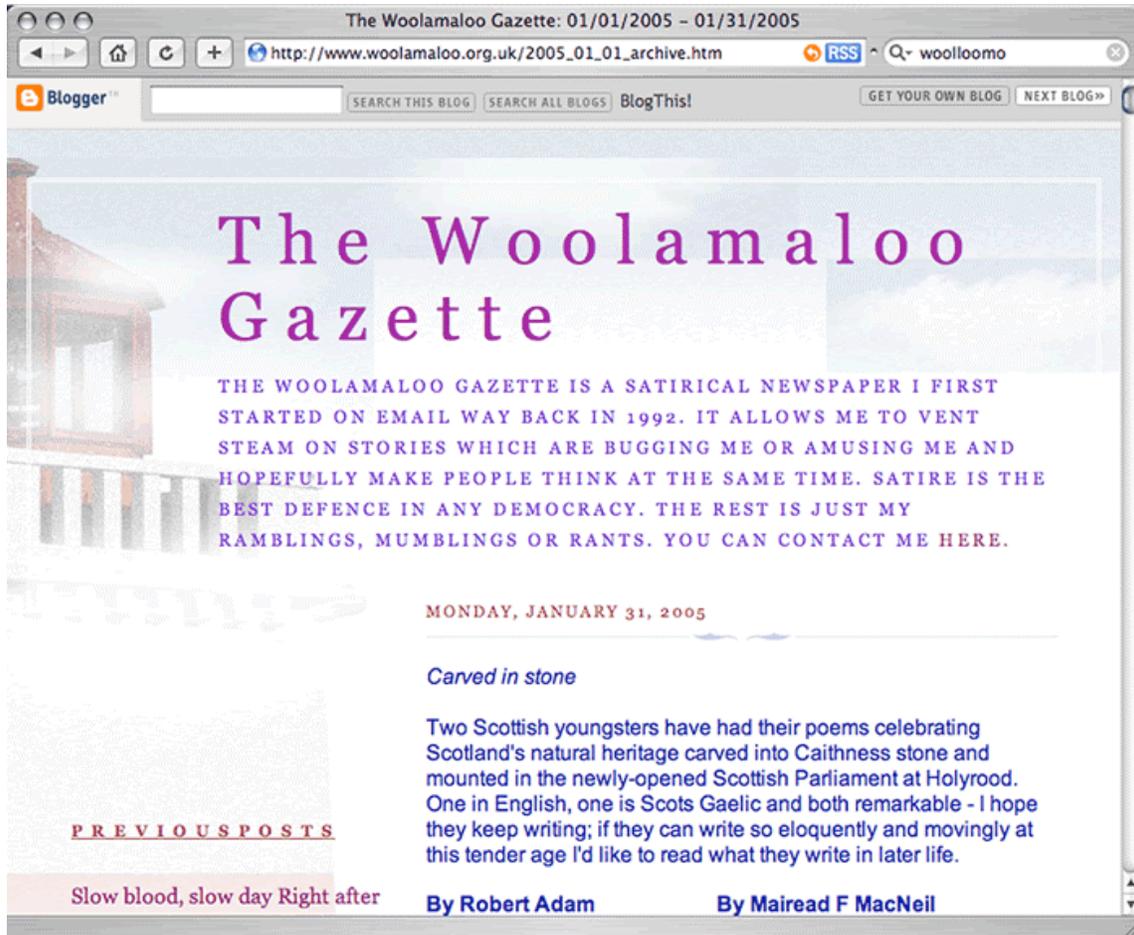


Figure 1: Gordon’s blog, The Woolamaloo Gazette (<http://www.woolamaloo.org.uk>), a “satirical newspaper” started in 1992.



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