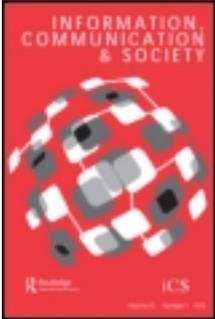


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BOOK REVIEW

Jane Parry

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BOOK REVIEW

Jane Parry, *Melissa Gregg's Work's Intimacy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 205 pp., ISBN 978-0-7456-5028-9, £14.99

Gregg's analysis of the impact of online technology upon employees' working and broader lives provides a timely narrative of what has been a period of dramatic organizational change in the world of work, and one that has been rapidly absorbed into professionals' daily lives with little anticipation of its broader consequences. The author's qualitative research is interspersed with photography to provide a rich and compelling account of the shift of digital working practices across public/private boundaries for a group of Australian professional workers in information and communication jobs over the period 2007–2009. This is a project that has much broader implications for changing working practices than the very specific group of white-collar or knowledge workers that she studied.

The book's great strength is the powerful way it deploys ethnographic evidence to draw attention to the way that hegemonic discourses describing the benefits of flexible working practices have been used to distract from the 'presence bleed' or function creep of modern information-based jobs. Gregg argues that this phenomenon represents a growth rather than a simple reshaping of work expectations, most markedly in terms of a fluid availability that belies job descriptions – what she describes as a 'coercive presenteeism'. It is a trend that has particularly acute implications for the ways in which women with young families are working, onto whose more fragmented timelines online technologies provide a perceived opportunity for workload control. Indeed, online technology's impact upon work is flagged as an important feminist issue with distinctively gendered benefits reflecting men and women's different contracts and working patterns. The book's empirical evidence provides a profound narrative of how the thus-cultivated mindset of working women positions them as ideal capitalist employees, with unregulated availability being a difficult expectation for part-timers to resist.

Paradoxically, much as Gregg's informants justified their reliance upon remote access to manage their workloads, the sense of compulsion they felt in so doing in order to maintain a sense of professional competence revealed that such behaviour was perceived to be increasingly necessary. For example, interviewees repeatedly talked about their out-of-office-hours email management, a

practice facilitated by widespread access to wireless broadband and which they had adopted in order to stay up to date with workplace issues when not on-site. Their thinking, irrational though it may be in terms of the accumulation of unpaid labour, was that by adopting such a strategy they were able to arrive at work briefed on developments and ready to perform the more visibly productive aspects of their jobs. The labour which this remote access work involved was becoming increasingly unbounded and unmanageable, and characterized by a new set of anxieties, including the perceived surveillance of online applications. Furthermore, technology underpinned a growing velocity of scheduling which added to the uncertainty of managing workloads. This new precariousness of work is largely self-managed, uncounted and unpaid, and therefore represents a critical new dimension to be conceptualized by sociologists of work.

The narrative of *Work's Intimacy* is divided into three parts. Its first section engages with how the aesthetic shift towards a 'mobile' working lifestyle has been achieved through the marketization of autonomy and job satisfaction, of which flexible working hours and working from home have been a large part, and are sustained by online technology. This Gregg terms 'the work/life ruse'. The second deals with how social networking and online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have provided a means for insecure employees to embed more meaning into their work, instrumentalizing friendship and blurring the lines between public and private social relationships, and fostering a distinctive new virtualized 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1984) combining forms of social and cultural capital. Gregg questions the degree of coerciveness implicated in such behaviour, particularly in sectors of the labour market where a social media presence is regarded as an increasingly necessary part of professional identity. The book's third section examines how work-related technology and its new forms of intimacy are (detrimentally) impacting upon family dynamics, a discussion which encompasses the gendered use of digital space, 'partial presence' or working online during time at home with family, and internet addiction.

As online technology develops at an exponential pace, *Work's Intimacy* serves as an important account of a stage when the working lives of office workers were dramatically transformed by a new set of expectations attached to this digital revolution, and particularly when remotely-accessed email became a ubiquitous and insatiable part of workloads. As Gregg argues, the artfulness of this reshaping of workload demands for a particular type of professional creative work is that at the same time as employees have felt compelled to subsume these additional demands into their working patterns, they are adopting the emotional labour of vocalizing deep commitment to and enterprise in the way they perform their work. This not only justifies and colludes in the fluid boundaries of their work but has the result of employees failing to count much of their online labour as part of their jobs, fundamental though it has become to performing these roles. And in a tradition of neoliberal governance, their working conditions

are regarded as individually-negotiable rather than structurally-mediated, requiring constant self-regulation to prove their value as workers.

Work has become such an intimate labour, transcending public/private boundaries that it is impossible to resist even as it encroaches, sometimes detrimentally, upon personal relationships and space. Gregg describes the mobile devices that have made this possible in terms of a ‘corporatization of intimacy’, but she goes far beyond a mere documentation of digital transformation in the workplace to provide a rich and thoughtful critique of the much-cited ‘flexible’ workplace, skilfully interweaving theoretical development with ethnographic material. *Work’s Intimacy* is a book that I have certainly found useful in stimulating my own thinking about the future of work, and it is an original and much needed empirical exploration of a time of unprecedented change in the modern office.

Jane Parry

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Jane Parry is a qualitative sociologist with a particular interest in class and work, who is a Research Fellow at the University of Southampton. Her recently completed research in its Third Sector Research Centre has focused around theory and policy, including projects on the recession and the third sector, and the third sector’s campaigning around and the shaping of the agenda in the 2010 general election. She previously worked in the Employment Group at the Policy Studies Institute, where she specialized in labour market deprivation, supporting transitions, and labour market programme evaluation. *Address*: University of Southampton, Third Sector Research Centre, Social Sciences, Southampton, SO17 1BJ United Kingdom. [email: J.Parry@soton.ac.uk]
