



*Extended Abstract*

## **Enterprise Social Media Under the Pretext of Voluntariness – An Unexplored Dimension of Digital Labor**

**Isabell C. Loeschner** <sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> London School of Economics and Political Science / Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK

E-Mail: I.c.loeschner@lse.ac.uk

\* Author to whom correspondence should be addressed; Tel.: +49 174 9270565

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### **Introduction**

Enterprise Social Media (ESM) have become increasingly popular over the last 5 years and promise to increase knowledge sharing, facilitate global collaboration and simplify work through quicker access to information. ESM afford visibility and persistence of content, as well as editability allowing ESM users to retain some control over content produced [5]. Yet, when implementing Social Media in corporate settings, employees are often reluctant to use such new platforms and only little is known about the actual adoption and use of ESM in corporate environments. From the few examples that exist to date [2] we know that many employees consider ESM as a waste of time and yet another tool of surveillance.

In addition, and in the light of the existing social media boom of recent years, many employers take successful ESM implementation within their companies for granted. And in fact, the existing literature on digital labor has demonstrated that often individuals are willing to expense efforts and time to participate and contribute to Social Media platforms without any monetary compensation [3-4]. For many Social Media users the mere participation, socialization and the chance of building up a reputation online are reward enough [1].

Encouraged by such voluntarily given online activity, corporate managers often expect that employees will start to actively utilize ESM in addition to their daily work, without critically reflecting that using Enterprise Social Media requires both time and effort on part of the employee that is neither listed in job descriptions nor performance targets. I argue instead that employees are expected to contribute to ESM platforms under the pretext of voluntariness, meaning that the managerial communication of the

platform is explicitly voluntary yet when looked more closely signs of pressure, dependency and lack of choice surface. I therefore propose that this adds a new dimension to the digital labor literature, which so far has not yet explored the effects of Enterprise Social Media in relation to digital labor.

## **Methods**

This research draws on data collected between March 2014 and January 2015 in which I intensively studied the implementation of a new Enterprise Social Media system in a large multinational technology company based in Germany. Using a mixed methods approach I gathered both qualitative and quantitative data. Firstly I conducted ethnographic work offline in the corporate headquarters, secondly I carried out ethnographic work online using the ESM platform implemented at the studied company. Finally I conducted a large survey carried out in the 28 biggest employee communities of the company using the new platform, resulting in a final N of 2690 employees.

The offline ethnographic work mainly comprised of dozens of informal conversations I had during visits to the four different company sites to which I had access during the research period. The online ethnographic work consisted of participant observation on the platform where I actively contributed to the content created on the ESM platform, and started and participated in existing conversations online. The sample for the survey was randomly drawn after having obtained an excel list of all potential employees with access to the new ESM tool and narrowing it down to employee communities with at least 1000 employees leaving me with the 28 biggest countries. By drawing on these different methods I was able to achieve data triangulation, allowing a comprehensive picture to emerge that combined both statistical as well as in-depth qualitative insights.

## **Results and Discussion**

From my research a complex situation surfaced, revealing an existing tension between the apparent social functions of ESM, a rigid legal context forbidding any private use of the platform and a management body caught up in the struggle to provide Social Media to employees in order to reap ESM's often proclaimed benefits and management's unwillingness to invest time and human resources into the success of the platform. Furthermore, the data showed that the concept of voluntariness of Social Media in a private setting does not automatically translate into corporate surroundings, where such voluntariness turned out to be a mere illusion. Instead, it became clear that ESM much rather add a new dimension of exploitation to the existing employer-employee relationship by expecting employees 1) to use Enterprise Social Media on top of their normal work duties, 2) to utilize skills that have been acquired during leisure time and 3) by deriving value from employees long after they have left the organization as their once intangible knowledge becomes manifest and permanent online.

## **Conclusions**

In conclusion, I argue that to date the digital labor literature has left one crucial dimension unexplored, namely *corporate* digital labor, that is, extra and uncompensated labor in corporate settings that is increasingly expected of employees contributing to both an intensification and extension of work. In addition, as the data showed, while on the surface the corporate dimension of digital labor differs

significantly from the digital labor on conventional Social Media platforms, as employees have agreed to a contractual and monetary relationship; a closer look revealed that ESM encroach on employees' leisure time in multiple ways allowing employers to reap value from their employees during work, after work and even beyond an employee's exit of the company. This research presents a first step in better understanding digital labor in corporate settings, yet more research in different organizations will be necessary to investigate this new dimension further. In particular, future research will be necessary to understand if and how these currently exploitative dynamics will change once ESM have become more widely used by employees.

## References and Notes

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