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'I didn't feel like I was alone anymore': evaluating self-organised employee coping practices conducted via Facebook

Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)

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Abstract

The long-term fracturing of the labour movement has led to increased attention to employee coping practices under new management practices and labour processes. However, the literature caters little for the recent rise of employees taking to social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, to find ways to cope with the pressures of contemporary employment. To explore the self-organised coping qualities of SNSs, interviews were conducted with front-line workers, employed by a large anti-trade union USA retailer, who contribute to a self-organised Facebook page set up as a place for fellow employees to deal with collective employment-related problems. The main findings suggest employee self-organised Facebook pages represent an important development and extension to the coping practices available to individual and groups of employees. The main implication of the findings is that Facebook groups appear to strengthen and widen the options for employee resilience in an age of continuing trade union retreat.

You get yelled at by a customer for doing your job right.

[RetailCo] tired me out more than any other job. I've worked other retail and I've worked food service. [RetailCo] tired me out to the point that even if I happened to get two consecutive days off I couldn't find the energy to do anything beyond washing my work clothes and laying around.

[RetailCo] is a shitty employer, I work for them. Low pay, random hours, inconsistent days, terrible policies, and some worthless management.

If you think [RetailCo] cares, think again. It's all about the almighty dollar for them...

(Recent examples of contributions to the employee-led RetailCo Facebook page).

Introduction

The fracturing of the labour movement over the past three decades has led to a plethora of scholarly interest in the self-organising activities of employees denied traditional sources of collective power. Such research largely considers the resilience of employees when denied access to traditional forms of representation. Early research on the fragmentation of labour includes studies reporting employee defiance in a nightclub environment (Analoui and Kakabadse, 1989), informal opposition using masculine-natured humour (Collinson, 1988), resistance and misbehaviour under Just-in-Time and Total Quality Management regimes (Delbridge,

1995) and management-led sabotage as a response to reduced job control (LaNuez and Jermier, 1994). Around the turn of the millennium, however, such attention shifted towards employee self-organisation activities under rapidly emerging electronic control technologies associated closely with call centres. Studies of this kind (e.g. Bain and Taylor, 2000; Townsend, 2005) were, as such, instrumental in critiquing the constraining powers on labour of new labour processes (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995).

In more recent times researchers have begun to explore the possibilities for non-unionised labour utilising social networking sites (SNSs) in relation to their collective employment-related interests (Wood, 2015). Central to such studies is how increasing numbers of employees see SNSs as a way to communicate work experiences to those outside the workplace, as well as a way to engage with others outside the workplace during work time (McDonald and Thompson, 2015). Many of such studies, for example, have focused on blogs as forums for employees to share critical accounts of employers (Schoneboom, 2007; 2011a; 2014; Pedersen *et al*., 2014), express conflict (Richards, 2008), reflect on employment matters and seek advice from similar others (Ellis and Richards, 2009) and resurrect and galvanise a sense of control and attachment to their own occupational or professional community (Richards and Kosmala, 2013). Further studies have also begun to consider how alternative SNSs, such as Facebook, Twitter and discussion forums, allow even wider and more inclusive forums for conflict expression (Schoneboom, 2011b; Richards, 2012; Sayers and Fachira, 2015; Wood, 2015).

Despite the existence of a large and evolving body of literature surrounding self-organised employee resistance and misbehaviour, there is a paucity of literature on competing forms of employee resilience, such as coping practices, under management regimes that are hostile to labour organising activities. There is even less attention given to non-unionised labour and the potential for self-organised employees to use SNSs as new and emergent ways to create and sustain "communities of coping" (Korczynski, 2003). Therefore, the main aim of the paper is to further theorise employee self-organised coping practices in the light of employees increasingly turning to SNSs as a reaction to pressures faced at work. This aim is explored in the context of the USA where the scale of employer anti-trade union sentiment is more acute and has a longer history compared to the UK-centric context of studies related to employee self-organised uses for SNSs (e.g. see Schoneboom, 2011a, 2011b; Richards and Kosmala, 2013; Pedersen *et al*., 2014). In doing so the current research makes an important theoretical contribution to our understandings of self-organised employee resilience in the Internet age.

In order to achieve such aims, the paper is guided by a broad research question: how do SNS-based self-organised coping groups compare and contrast with work-based self-organised coping groups? Further and more guiding research questions are: what do SNS-based self-organised coping groups allow employees to do that is less or not possible via work-based self-organised coping groups, and, what are the limitations to SNS-based self-organised groups? The paper itself is structured as follows. First, there is a review of the literature on coping practices, with particular attention to literature surrounding self-organised forms of coping. In the second

section research design, methodology and case details are described and discussed. The third section concerns the presentation and analysis of the main findings from the study, based on interviews with USA front-line retail employees, dispersed throughout the USA, who follow and contribute to an employee-led Facebook page. The final and concluding section considers the wider significance and implications of the study in relation to theories related to communities of coping.

Self-organised employee coping practices

Coping and resistance

Defining employee coping at work is not a clear cut task. For instance, there are debates over whether coping behaviour is a neglected form of employee resistance (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Noon *et al.*, 2013) or a concomitant act of resistance and consent (Collinson, 1994; Sturdy and Fineman, 2001). Further, studies suggest coping can be an important precondition for resistance (van den Broek *et al.*, 2008; Baines and Cunningham, 2011). For the purpose of the current research, however, coping is taken to be the practices employees employ to alleviate the tensions and pressures of work (Deery *et al.*, 2010). In other words, the many and varied resourceful and creative practices that non-traditionally organised employees develop in order to construct some degree of meaning for the work they are directed by managers to undertake (Noon *et al.*, 2013).

Types of employee coping

The literature on coping tends to be differentiated on the grounds of research focused on individualised forms of employee coping behaviour and group/collective forms of employee coping behaviour. Individualised coping behaviour, however, appears to be explained in large part by the lack of capacity of labour to act collectively in the work setting (Carls, 2009). For instance, a range of research relates individual coping behaviour to tightly controlled labour processes (Mullins, 1999; Hyman *et al.*, 2005) or highly individualised/precarious organisational roles (Mantler *et al.*, 2005; Jennings and McDougald, 2007). Group/collective forms of coping, or communities of coping (Korczynski, 2003), also appears to be a common feature of literature exploring coping behaviour in organisations. Korczynski (2003), for example, sees such groups as employees seeking support from each other in the face of collective work problems, such as difficult customer relationships that managers do little if anything to alleviate. Korczynski further notes, depending on their capacity, communities of coping can also play a crucial part in the wider social relations of the workplace.

Self-organised coping groups, moreover, are likely to have a greater capacity to act if, for instance, trade unions have some degree of influence in the work setting (Korczynski, 2003; van den Broek *et al.*, 2008), management is sympathetic towards the pressures faced by frontline employees (Deery *et al.*, 2010), mutual support is part of professional practice (Lewis, 2005; Filstad, 2010), gaps are exploited in control systems (Raz, 2007), common job tools, such as mobile phones, are misappropriated (Hislop and Axtell, 2011), or other non-management oppressive relations, such as based on gender, bring the oppressed together (Handy, 2006). The

focus of attention from now onwards, however, is self-organised or collective forms of coping and the extent to which the literature suggests SNSs may or may not alter in some way the capacity of employees to cope when employed by anti-trade union organisations.

The conditions for self-organised coping

It is apparent that self-organised coping involves a wide-range of practices, which appear related to working conditions and the nature of work. For instance, research has revealed self-organised coping practices including the exchange of "tricks of the trade" or important working information (Raz, 2007; Hislop and Axtell, 2011), "gallows" or "black" humour (Filstad, 2010; Baines and Cunningham, 2011), discussing difficulties with case work (Stroebaek, 2013), women employees aiming to be the company of other women when working with men, including the use of returned sexual putdowns (Handy, 2006) and generally offering colleagues emotional support in order to get through the working day (Korczynski, 2003; Lewis, 2005). In non-work terms, a small amount of literature revealed self-organised coping practice extended to employees "income pooling" in order to cope with poor or inconsistent levels of pay (Mullins, 1999; Datta *et al.*, 2007).

Defining and describing coping is one thing, yet considering why employees seek to cope is another. Where research has sought to explore the conditions for self-organised forms of coping, reference is often made to employment-related problems, such as patient violence (Baines and Cunningham, 2011), racial discrimination (Datta *et al.,* 2007), irate and abusive customers (Korczynski, 2003;

Sloan, 2012), negative spillover of work into non-work life (Hyman *et al.*, 2005), work intensification and forced work flexibility (Carls, 2010; Deery *et al.*, 2010), sexual harassment (Handy, 2006), contradictions in emotional labour practices (Lewis, 2005; Filstad, 2010; Stroebaek, 2013), contradictions in organisational culture (Korczynski, 2003; Raz, 2007), isolation at work (Hislop and Axtell, 2011; van den Broek *et al.*, 2008) and low pay and low occupational mobility (Mullins, 1999). However, the employment-related problems discussed in such research are unified in many ways. Firstly, it evident that employers purposefully avoid attempts to resolve many of such problems, as they are deemed by employers to be out of their control or some way beyond what they are willing to act upon. Further, employer interventions are likely to conflict with the primary objectives of work organisations, or that fundamental, permanent and costly cultural changes would be required to solve such problems. Secondly, it apparent that employers are likely to want to deal with such problems on their own terms, using a range of problematic interventions, such as training to deal with difficult customers or patients, or family-friendly policies to take the edge of balancing the pressures of work and wider responsibilities.

Non-workplace self-organised coping practices

Despite many contemporary employers openly displaying negative sentiments towards employee collectivisation and likely to take extensive steps to minimise or even eradicate employee collectivism, the vast majority of literature highlights how the physical workplace remains the main location for self-organised coping practices. Indeed, research highlights how self-organised coping practices proliferate even in

the least employee-friendly environments, such as call centres (Korczynski, 2003; Raz, 2007; van den Broek *et al.*, 2008; Deery *et al.*, 2010). The same research also reveals how self-organised coping practices can proliferate beyond the workplace. More importantly, such research shines a light on practices which are in reality an accompaniment to their workplace equivalents, rather than a sign of employer success at driving employee self-organisation out of the workplace. A key difference compared to workplace-based self-organised coping practices, however, is in how external self-organised coping practices involve fellow employees; yet such practices can also draw on individuals from wider non-workplace social networks. Research in this instance is fairly limited, perhaps because organisational research is often bound by the physical work setting, but there is evidence for external self-organised coping practices being conducted in "backstage settings" (Lewis, 2005), pub, park or bowling hall afters work (Raz, 2007) and through the use of mobile phones (Hislop and Axtell, 2011). Further opportunities for self-organised coping practices can be conducted in "homespace" and drawing on support from family and friends, some of whom may be living overseas (Mullins, 1999), as well as fellow migrants struggling together to survive low pay and insecure employment in an unwelcoming city (Datta *et al.*, 2007). Research, moreover, highlights how mobile phone application developers can tap into large social networks, or "occupational communities" in order to cope better with precarious working conditions and unstable labour markets (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft, 2013).

The potential for external social networks to augment self-organised coping practices is perhaps coming of age, particularly with the rise of SNSs over the past

ten years or so. Indeed, recent research highlights how microblogging, most likely through a Twitter account, is emerging as a valuable coping expression in times of widespread crisis (Gaspar *et al.*, 2014). What is more, despite the continued retreat of trade unions, research reveals an opposite trend in community-based organisations, often surrounding employment issues (Tapia, 2013), with such ventures unlikely to be viable without an integration of SNSs into operations of community-based organisations. Further research also offers encouraging insights into the potential of SNSs in relation to self-organised coping practices. In the broadest sense research brings to light how SNSs create the potential for non-unionised employees to move from largely individualised to self-organised forms of workplace misbehaviour (Richards, 2012). Research also highlights how work blogging allows large numbers of employees to maintain an emotional and intellectual distance between work and non-work lives (Schoneboom, 2010) and connect with similar minded employees through on-line communities based on mutual and self-defined interests (Richards, 2008; Ellis and Richards, 2009).

Assessing self-organised coping practices

What can be achieved and where the limits lie to self-organisation coping is also a key feature of the previous research on this practice. Achievements of employees involved in self-organised coping practices include collectively relieving employment-related stress (Sloan, 2012; Stroebaek, 2013), creating spaces for non-employment related purposes (Lewis, 2005), recreating practices, such as coffee breaks, previously withdrawn by management (Stroebaek, 2013), socialising newcomers and creating shared awareness of management practices (Raz, 2007), ameliorating the

effects of customer abuse (van den Broek *et al.*, 2008) and slowing down individual competitiveness encouraged by management (Korczynski, 2003). Furthermore, self-organisation coping practices also facilitate self-preservation in the face of unwelcome attention from non-management oppressors (Handy, 2006). Research that considers externally conducted self-organised coping practices suggests even more can be achieved through the use of external networks and SNSs, including access to a wider range of individuals and an opportunity to organise out of sight of managers.

However, the research also suggests that in more extreme cases of, for example customer abuse or work intensification, self-organised coping practices bring limited results, often leading to employees having to be absent from or leave their employment (Deery *et al.*, 2010). Research has also found self-organised coping groups to be hard to break into for newcomers (Stroebaek, 2013). It can also be inferred that self-organised coping practices are also limited as the groups formed around such practices are not permanent, subject to management intervention, based on small numbers of friends and limited resources, often unknown to the majority of the workforce and unsustainable if they grow beyond a relatively small group of employees. Further limitations are noted in relation to self-organised coping practices, external social networks and SNSs. For instance, wider self-organised coping is likely to have limited direct influence on what eventually happens in the workplace. Furthermore, in the Internet age, employers, especially larger corporations, seem eager to take punitive actions against employees who criticise them through the use of SNSs (Schoneboom, 2011a).

Despite a range of drawbacks, it could be said that employees self-organising around informal work-based groups have a lot to gain from self-organised coping practices. Indeed, self-organised coping practices appear to offer non-traditionally organised employees some scope to create a sense of solidarity, particularly in terms of putting an emotional or psychological distance between themselves and management practices and prerogatives. Such practices are also likely to lead to more advantageous outcomes when compared to what can be achieved in relation to pursuing individualised coping practices. Furthermore, it is likely that connections between internal and small self-organised coping groups and external social networks, increasingly related to SNSs, are likely to create, at the very least, a new, emergent and perhaps separate form of self-organised coping. More research is clearly required and the next section contemplates designing a study to further explore self-organising coping practices and SNSs.

Research design, methodology and case details

Researching employee SNS activities

One way to explore the self-organising activities of employees conducted via SNSs is the emergent and multi-method approach of netnography (Kozinets, 2010). Research, however, reveals dependency on single methods to be an efficient and realistic approach to uncovering details of employee SNS activities. For instance, similar previous research involved semi-structured interviews, largely conducted via telephone or a range of non-face-to-face e-communication methods (Schoneboom,

2007, 2014; Ellis and Richards, 2009; Richards and Kosmala, 2013), self-reporting e-questionnaires (Richards, 2008) and the analysis of Internet media stories (Richards, 2012) and blog extracts (Pedersen *et al.*, 2014) as primary sources. What is apparent is the reality of conducting research with individual informants who may be thousands of miles away and even then spread over vast geographical areas. Further, what forms the focus of the research, communication involving many people, would be problematic in terms of resources to keep track of such activities. A further dilemma is that of the researcher or researchers acquiring "insider status" as part of developing trust with informants. As such, small samples, based on key informants, are currently typical of research related to employee use of SNSs.

Data collection and data analysis

Given that the study is exploratory in nature and access to informants had the potential to be problematic and raise complex ethical issues, the lead researcher took a pragmatic approach to primary data collection. It was decided in advance that semi-structured interviews would represent an ideal means to gain new information on employee self-organised Facebook groups, as it allows the researcher to see the research topic from the perspective of the interviewee (King, 2004).On a lesser scale analysis of the Facebook page was carried out, in order to gain an appreciation of the ways in which employee Facebook users express employment realities for themselves, unmediated and unprompted (Richards and Kosmala, 2013).

The fieldwork took place between February and July 2013. The focus of the research is employees who follow and contribute to an employee-led Facebook

page, set up as a response to the perceived wrongdoings of a large USA-based retail employer (henceforth referred to as "RetailCo"). The study was principally organised and most of the field data collected and analysed by the lead researcher based in London, UK. Study recruitment began with 200 friend requests sent to subscribers to the Facebook page in question. Approximately 50 friend requests were accepted by RetailCo employees. Those who accepted friend requests were then sent a short message explaining details of the research and the credentials of the lead researcher. After receiving this message ten employees "unfriended" the researcher and a further 23 employees did not reply to the message. Follow up messages to RetailCo employees, including formal contact details, such as the lead researcher's institutional email address, provided important details of what the interview would involve and options in terms of how the interview could be conducted - options given were telephone, email, messenger and Skype (with or without video). As such, time negotiating access to participants, including attempts to develop an insider status within the Facebook group, dwarfed the actual time spent arranging and conducting interviews.

Fifteen employees eventually agreed to be interviewed, although five employees later rescinded the offer or blocked further communications. A key reason for a low uptake rate (less than 5 per cent) appears to surround management-level RetailCo employees infiltrating the Facebook page in question, with also a perception that RetailCo hires external people to infiltrate the page on behalf of corporate-level RetailCo management. The following pre-interview instant messaging extract exemplifies recruitment problems faced in the current study: '...in the past people

from corporate offices of [RetailCo] have spied on associates [of RetailCo] and friended them to get information...'. (Field notes).

The eventual fieldwork involved a self-selecting sample of ten RetailCo employees spread widely across nine USA states (see Table One). Informants were employed by RetailCo for an average of 6-7 years, 60 per cent were male, the average age of the informants was 40 years and all informants were hourly paid staff/Associates of RetailCo (see Table One for individual roles and further details). Three of the ten employees (see Table One) were interviewed twice. Follow up interviews were used as a means to gain additional insights as understandings of issues progressed. The technology used to interview each participant is highlighted in Table One. Telephone/Skype interviews lasted between 20 and 80 minutes, averaging 40 minutes in total, and were transcribed verbatim. Interviews using Facebook messenger lasted a similar amount of time and final transcriptions were copied and pasted into a Word document for analytical purposes. Email interviews involved sending three questions at a time (18 questions in total), plus follow-up clarifying questions, with informants typically taking 24 hours to respond to each round of questions.

TABLE ONE INSERTED ABOUT HERE

The topics explored in the interviews were exploratory in nature. As such, the topic guide broadly followed key themes uncovered in the literature related to conventional, work-based forms of self-organised coping. Broad themes included reasons to join the Facebook group, value and significance of joining and being in the

Facebook group, concerns regarding being in the Facebook group. Thematic analysis was applied once all interviews were converted/transferred into a single dataset. In this case, Attride-Stirling's (2001) framework was used to unearth expected and emergent themes salient in the text apparent at different levels. This involved identifying basic, organising and global themes. Transcripts and recordings were revisited several times for familiarity and the coding of key words and basic themes. This enabled data to be reduced to allow for groupings of basic themes into emerging patterns and organising themes.

RetailCo and the employee-led RetailCo Facebook page

"RetailCo" is a large retailer headquartered in the USA and employs a significant number of employees across this country. Founded in the 1960s, RetailCo offers a wide range of consumer goods, from food and drink to electrical appliances. RetailCo do not recognise trade unions and have a long history of fiercely resisting attempts to unionise its workforces. The case in question, however, pivots on the contributions of a modest, yet purposeful sample of RetailCo employees, who participate in a self-organised Facebook page (see Table One). Considering the potential sensitive nature of this research it was decided to keep the details of both organisations (Facebook group and employer), as well as respondents, anonymous. Anonymity was deemed appropriate in order to protect respondents from perceived repercussions from their employer.

The "field of action" (Bauer *et al.*, 2000, p. 3) chosen for this study involves hourly paid RetailCo "Associates" who regularly engage with a self-organised Facebook

forum organised around their employer. The "RetailCo Facebook" page as officially described in the "About" Facebook feature concerns the following:

This page is for us, the Associates of [RetailCo]. It is designed to be a forum for Associates to connect and share. Through this page we will:

1) Share ideas to create solutions to collective problems we have at [RetailCo]

2) Engage each other in a respectful, fun and meaningful way

3) Become part of our community of Associates that support each other

4) Refrain from posting inappropriate, offensive, or unrelated to the topic being discussed

Whether you disagree or agree with anyone's individual comments, we hope you are able to feel free to express your views in a meaningful and respectful way. However, we will not tolerate any personal attacks on this page. If anyone posts a comment directly attacking anyone in this community they will be removed from posting on our page. For any questions regarding our Facebook policy please email us at info@XXXX.org ("Page Info" on RetailCo Facebook page).

The RetailCo Facebook page meets the criteria for a self-organised coping community (Korczynski, 2003) as a key aim of the page is to create a supportive community surrounding collective employment problems. It is evident that the Facebook page would also qualify as a forum for self-organised resistance (van den Broek *et al.*, 2008; Baines and Cunningham, 2011). However, resistance, for the most part, is beyond the scope of the current research.

The employee-orientated RetailCo Facebook page involves wider SNS self-organising activities, including closed Facebook pages, Twitter feeds and Facebook embedded YouTube videos. The Facebook page started in 2010 and in June 2015 has approximately 56,000 "likes". It is not possible to discern exactly how many employees of RetailCo regularly or intermittently engage with the RetailCo Facebook page, yet the following interview quote, from a long-term user of the RetailCo Facebook page, indicates employee use of the page from inception to the time of the fieldwork:

> I joined [RetailCo Facebook page] shortly after it came into being. In one year, it's first year, we went from fewer than a hundred members to several hundred members. We now have several thousands of members, and they are all across the country... (Garden Assistant).

Findings and analysis

This section of the paper concerns the presentation of interview data gathered from RetailCo informants. The findings detail several key aspects of self-organised coping practices, allowing a comparison to be made between conventional and emergent self-organised coping practices. The findings focus on reasons to join the employee Facebook group, the value and significance employees draw from joining and being in a Facebook group, and the concerns employees have with being involved with a Facebook group.

Reasons to seek mutual support from fellow employees

The interviews revealed RetailCo employees experience a range of employment-related problems similar to the problems faced by employees uncovered in previous research on self-organised coping practices. For instance, work intensification (Carls, 2009; Deery *et al.*, 2010) appeared to be a concern of RetailCo employees:

> We have hour-long waits at the register. Everyone is running round the store on skeleton shift. We have one person covering 3-5 departments. And they are still asking us to go up and push carts, and run registers and do everything else in the stores. (Pet Care Assistant).

This comment also implies employees experience a great deal of pain working at RetailCo. Indeed, it was evident that working with customers, often ignorant or oblivious to the plight of the front-line RetailCo employee, caused a great deal of particular pain (Korczynski, 2003), which proved difficult to reconcile on an individual basis:

> I think [customers] think we are uneducated and unhelpful. All they see are the lines and everyone running around with no time to help. They don't know that: 1. Many workers are college educated. 2. We are not able to help customers because there's no staff scheduled. (Maintenance Assistant).

In keeping with previous research findings on self-organised coping practices, front-line retail employees are expected by their employer to be flexible (Raz, 2007) and as such subject to anxiety provoked by a lack of employment security: 'The fear [RetailCo] make[s] people feel. People not knowing what their hours are, whether

they have enough work next week, whether they gonna lose their jobs for speaking up.' (Sales Assistant). This comment also reveals the precariousness and stressful nature of frontline employment at RetailCo.

Employees at RetailCo also experience further difficult to reconcile experiences, this time related to low pay (Mullins, 1999): 'How can people be expected to survive on the wages? I mean this is not a living wage... I'm earning less than $9 an hour' (Sales Assistant), and organisational culture (Korczynski, 2003; Raz, 2007):

> [RetailCo's] normal response is we're giving you a chance today to speak to an HR rep from head office. I [know other people on the Facebook page] that spoke to HR at head office and what HR did was turnaround and pushed it back down to market manager and back to store manager and nothing got done. (Deli Assistant).

These sentiments illustrate deep employee frustrations with a range of employer policies and practices related to remuneration and informal grievance resolution. However, interviews also revealed that employees seek mutual support on problems that go beyond their immediate organisational role and direct experience of work. The first quote below relates to an employee affected by the scrutiny of the wider reputation of their employer in the popular media:

> I joined Employee Group because last April, [RetailCo] got caught in a [scandal] involving [country]. It went worldwide, which made me feel very different about [RetailCo]. Now, I'm ashamed to be called a [RetailCo] worker... The CEO [name] and the president [name] are dodging responsibilities for all of the scandals and other crimes they have committed. (Garden Assistant).

The comment reveals employer coverage in the popular media to be a source of employee anger, yet employees appear to have no clear cut way to act on such information and opinion. Further, RetailCo employees are also similarly affected by corporate narratives on employee remuneration: '….the [benefits program] presentation strongly gave the impression that [corporate level related] changes were for the betterment of the employees. Wrong. In fact, the employees received $350 million less – in one year...' (People Greeter). As in the previous instance, employees appear to have limited options available to them for acting upon such grievances.

Moreover, grievances extended to the ways that RetailCo employees coped with an employer who threatens to discipline employees who follow federal laws that conflict with employer priorities:

> If you WORK [original emphasis] for a hospital and are stopped by the police, you have to show proof that you work in a hospital (usually your time card). Anyone else gets a ticket. Stores can't be opened, and no one should be out shopping. Yet, [RetailCo] expects you to report to work and if you don't they will attempt to hold it against you. (Cashier 1).

This quote, along with all others in this sub-section, illustrates how RetailCo creates a myriad of situations where employees have little option but to seek mutual support from fellow employees. Being aware of and having an opportunity to express details of a multitude of employment-related problems may be of benefit, to what extent coming together helps will be discussed next.

The collective coping qualities of a Facebook page

During interviews it became evident that the activities surrounding the Facebook page provided all the expected basics of a self-organised group aiming to dilute the harsher aspects of difficult employment situations. For instance, the Facebook page in question represents a place for employees to exchange important employment-related information (Hislop and Axtell, 2011), especially as RetailCo frontline employees are afforded little time and support to explore such matters on work time: '[RetailCo] Facebook page offers what my rights are in the work place and what [RetailCo's] policies are' (Maintenance Assistant).

However, the opportunity to access employment-related information often available from official employer channels did not feature as highly as the ways in which the Facebook page could provide a forum for employees to share emotional support (Korczynski, 2003; Lewis, 2005):

I was afraid but I also had a feeling of relief, I saw [RetailCo Facebook page] and I didn't feel like I was alone anymore. I knew that there were several thousand of us that felt the same way. I felt like I'd become part of a community and that people understood what was going on. At the very least, at least I would have emotional support. (Pet Care Assistant).

I feel like [fellow employees are] there for me, supportive, encouraging always there. Me and many of the members we talk almost every day we discuss back and forth, it's inspiring and motivating. It's just this huge group of people that came together and is trying to make life easier. (Deli Assistant).

The comments show how possibilities for coping are heightened when awareness of fellow employees sharing similar problems becomes widely established, as well as

the realisation that many fellow employees are also there to listen and be empathetic with employees facing similar problems.

However, the realisation of a common situation had repercussions for employee behaviour, such as having the potential to influence social relations (Korczynski, 2003) at RetailCo. Nearly all participants indicated involvement with the Facebook page led to them becoming more active about injustices at RetailCo. The following example being typical of such responses:

> [It] [s]tarted out online, Facebook, joining in the conversations, reading what people were posting, getting information. Now I'm more active than that, I started to join in other activities, you know to show support. I attend rallies; join in the calls, activities like that. (Sales Assistant).

This demonstrates the Facebook page to be more than a forum for coping and self-organised activities surrounding SNSs, thus also offering a potential springboard for employee resistance (van den Broek *et al.*, 2008; Baines and Cunningham, 2011), or actions to change the attitudes of RetailCo senior managers towards frontline employees: '[The RetailCo Facebook page] exists to fight against the bosses' retaliations on workers who speak out for better change and other unfair labor practices' (Garden Assistant).

Beyond the mobilising capabilities of SNSs, important unique features concerning self-organised coping via SNSs also emerged from the findings. Many of these differences were made possible because of the technology involved in SNSs. For example, the Facebook page allows asynchronous self-organised coping practices to

develop: '[I] [n]ormally go on [RetailCo Facebook] to read what others are posting - there are pro and con posts' (People Greeter). The Facebook page also helps connect employees dispersed throughout a vast country such as the USA: 'I live in Massachusetts but I talk to people who live in California and… I think [Facebook] helps a great deal.' (Cashier 1).

Furthermore, as suggested in the quote above, the nature of SNSs greatly expands the number of topics discussed by such groups. Also, the public can be drawn into such forums, allowing employees to challenge the perceptions of third parties on life at RetailCo: 'I visit the page and post comments about things that I think are important for people to know about. What I see in the store and also to join in the conversations. I like to put people straight, especially people that don't even work at [RetailCo]' (Cashier 2).

The technology of the Facebook page allows ex-RetailCo employees to get involved and creates opportunities for sub-groups to form. Other similarly affected occupational groups can observe such activities and replicate them to reflect their own predicaments:

Since the organization begun, many people have joined, and many former and present employees have joined. Since the original [RetailCo Facebook page] was started, many off-springs of similar pages have developed concerning [RetailCo]. Because of [RetailCo Facebook page] speaking out other workers are speaking out and developing their own sites: nurses, fast food employees, waiters and waitresses, teachers, warehouse workers, truck drivers, factory workers. (Cashier 1).

The quote illustrates, moreover, how the publicness and inclusivity of such activities allows many and wider disadvantaged employee groups to learn about the coping practices of one particular employee group and apply such practices in different contexts. There are, however, limitations to the RetailCo Facebook page, as will be seen next.

The realities of self-organised coping practices conducted via a Facebook page

The overarching reality of self-organised coping practices via Facebook is that power remains very much with the employer. In previous research self-organised coping practices stopped a long way short of reconciliation between employee sense of control and the harsh reality of tightly controlled and arbitrary labour processes (e.g. Deery *et al.*, 2010). This was also evidently the case with the RetailCo Facebook page. For instance, the Facebook page did not lead to RetailCo employees acquiring a sense that practices of this kind could make changes related to job losses: '[Despite what we do through the RetailCo Facebook page] ...we're still deeply afraid of losing our jobs' (Pet Care Assistant).

The fear of being unable to prevent job losses was also extended by a fear that if mobilisation around the Facebook page led to the possibility of gaining trade union recognition in some of RetailCo's stores that RetailCo corporate level management would go to extremes to prevent such a situation happening or spreading: '[RetailCo corporate management] are telling people 'if she gets this store unionised they are just going to shut it down' (Customer Service Manager).

A further concern related to the RetailCo Facebook page is that, as found elsewhere in research on work blogs (e.g. Schoneboom, 2011a), employees who use the RetailCo Facebook page run the risk of being unlawfully or unreasonably victimised or disciplined by their employer for being part of employment-related SNS activities: '[Since using the RetailCo Facebook page] I have a very large target on my back' (Customer Service Manager).

The findings threw up further distinct limitations to employee self-organised activities surrounding Facebook pages. Firstly, many Facebook members, according to interviewees, are prone to breaking the Facebook page house rules (see previous section) in terms of posting irrelevant and distracting information to the Facebook page in question: 'Unfortunately, some members think of [the RetailCo Facebook] pages as a social network. I don't want to hear about what someone's granddaughter did, unless it concerns [the RetailCo Facebook]' (Cashier 1).

Beyond irritating distractions common in wider user of Facebook, a second and further major problem emerged in how the technology of the Facebook page may not provide the capacity to cater for the diverse range of interests of a large and dispersed group of employees. Participants, for example, reported difficulties finding what is relevant or important to them on the Facebook page: 'One problem is there are several different pages with slightly different titles, each having more than 10,000 likes. One central page would be more effective' (People Greeter).

Despite being limited in terms of distractions and ease of locating relevant discussion topics, it is evident that SNSs such as Facebook appear to offer a great

deal to employees who struggle to cope under harsh management regimes and tightly controlled labour processes. The following and final section now discusses the wider and theoretical implications of the findings.

Conclusions

The focus of the current research is employee self-organised coping practices, with such practices previously researched and theorised within a wider context of an increasingly fractured labour movement. An emergent context to such practices, however, is the increased uptake of SNSs by employees seeking solutions to the many challenges and problems of contemporary employment (Richards, 2012). Practices surrounding employee self-organised coping, moreover, is an important topic in organisation studies in terms of theory, fitting closely with debates critiquing dystopian views of employee agency under new management practices and labour processes (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995; Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999), as well as more emergent debates surrounding shifting loci of employee agency, from workplaces to blogs (Schoneboom, 2007; Richards, 2008) and more recently SNSs, such as Facebook, Twitter and community forums (Schoneboom, 2011a; Richards, 2012; Sayers and Fachira, 2015; Wood, 2015). Further exploring employee self-organised coping practices also commands practical value, mainly because new management practices and labour processes are likely to create an ongoing need for employees to alleviate the tensions and pressures of work (Deery *et al.*, 2010; Noon *et al.*, 2013).

A scarcity of literature on self-organised coping practices, with a further and more urgent need to update such literature in the light of growing employee use of SNSs to cope with employment, provided the main motivation for the current research. The main findings are as follows. Firstly, the findings suggest self-organised coping practices conducted via SNSs represent an important extension of workplace-based coping, especially in the context of a growing trend in fiercely anti-trade union employers. Secondly, self-organised coping practices conducted via SNSs represent an extension of both group and individual forms of employee coping in the workplace. Thirdly, self-organised coping via SNSs appears to bring with it a range of new advantages for employees. Indeed, it would seem the technologies involved in SNSs further extend the possibility for employee creativity, resourcefulness and resilience, in important and telling ways. Finally, while the current study is defined by a snapshot of how employees in one situation interact via a SNS, the evidence presented points towards SNSs having a positive impact on employee ability to cope in an environment where employees lack the capacity to regulate both the shopfloor and the wider affairs of their large and powerful employer.

However, SNSs also come with a range of disadvantages, such as the potential for employers to surveil the activities and grievances of employees and in turn impact on who employees 'friend', and the potential for many more RetailCo employees to be put off contributing to the Facebook page and wider associated activities. Having said that, such disadvantages appear heavily outweighed by the advantages of self-organised coping via SNSs.

Taken together, the findings strengthen theories related to employee resilience under new management practices and labour processes, as well as strengthening theories surroundings SNSs as emergent forums for furthering employee interests. In more specific terms, the findings help extend the theoretical concept of communities of coping (Korczynski, 2003). This extension comes by way of attempts to widen the concept from being largely understood as a narrow and exclusive workplace-based phenomenon, to a phenomenon, with the help of SNS technology, based on a much wider geographical component and including members beyond the organisation. More importantly, the findings suggest SNSs allow communities of coping to exist in and between organisations where employees lack a capacity to act on a collective basis (Carls, 2009).

These findings, as well as the clear limitations to current research, offer suggestions for further research related to self-organised coping practices and SNSs. Further research, ideally using netnography (Kozinets, 2010), is required to gain deeper and more nuanced insights into such practices, particularly in terms of capturing the longer term impact of SNSs on employee coping practices. It is evident that in order to fully explore self-organising coping practices in relation to SNSs, additional research needs to target a wider range of occupational groups, generations of employees, geographical contexts, as well as draw on the perceptions of other actors in the employment relationship (e.g. governments, employers and trade unions). Further research should also consider a wider range of both current and emergent SNSs.

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Informant	Interview (2013)	Job title	State of residence	Length of service (years)	Gender	Age range	Interview technology
1	March	Garden Assistant	California	9	Male	25-34	Messenger
2	March	Pet Care Assistant	Ohio	3	Female	25-34	Telephone
3	March and July	People Greeter	Missouri	3	Male	65+	Email
4	March and July	Deli Assistant	Minnesota	2	Male	18-24	Skype (with video)
5	March and July	Cashier 1	Massachusetts	13	Female	55-64	Email/Skype (no video)
6	July	Maintenance Assistant	Pennsylvania	14	Male	35-44	Email
7	July	Customer Service Manager	Louisiana	8	Female	45-54	Skype
8	July	Sales Assistant	Texas	3	Male	25-34	Skype
9	July	Cashier 2	South Carolina	7	Female	45-54	Email
10	July	Overnight Stocker	California	2	Male	18-24	Messenger

Table One: Details of case interviews and interviewees