

Cara WALLIS

“Technologies of Freedom?”

Mobile Phones, Resistance, and Surveillance in the Workplace

The mobile phone is often heralded as ushering in a new era of freedoms from rigid notions of space, place, and time. However, the benefits of mobile telephony depend as much on technical capabilities as the often unspoken ethics of trust, responsibility, and mutual respect among members of a given society. What are the effects of mobile telephony when such ethics are violated? This research offers one answer to this question through presenting a case study of mobile phone use among rural-to-urban migrant workers and their employers in Beijing, China. As an extremely marginalized population, rural-to-urban migrants often face exploitative labor conditions, including long work hours, minimal or no time off, and low pay. They have enthusiastically embraced cell phones as a powerful means to overcome these limiting material conditions and to maintain social networks. In the workplace, they also use mobile phones to engage in individual and primarily symbolic acts of resistance, through, for example, using a phone at work despite restrictions against such usage. At the same time, employers utilize mobile phones to track and even harass their employees when they are not at the work. Unlike in most cases where parents use mobile phones to keep tabs on their children, this type of surveillance is not built on mutual trust or affection. Instead, the mobile phone becomes a tool to reinforce unequal and often very gendered power relationships. This study therefore engages with Foucaultian notions of power and discourse to understand the practices of both migrant workers and their employers in struggles over autonomy, agency, and control. It is based on ten months of ethnographic fieldwork that included interviews, participant observation, and technology diaries. The research seeks to present a nuanced description of the ethics of mobile phone use and thereby enlarge our understanding of this “technology of freedom.”

Cara WALLIS is a doctoral candidate in communication and a research assistant at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles. She has spent significant time working, studying, and conducting research in Beijing, China. Cara’s research interests include discursive constructions of new communication technologies and how issues of power, gender, class, and ethnicity intersect in the social uses of mobile technologies. She is particularly interested in the new social and cultural spaces opened up by mobile phones among marginalized populations, including rural-to-urban migrants in China and Mexican and Central American day laborers in Los Angeles. E-mail: cwallis@usc.edu.

