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Grey Space: Call Centres and the Information Society

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Abstract: Over the past decade, call centres have become a rising industry in contemporary globalized society, particularly in smaller towns and economically underdeveloped areas. The call centre industry has been both praised and contested by commentators throughout its development. Various theorists see call centres as saviors of suffering economies while others view them as modern production lines—unfulfilling and monotonous places representative of a business model that will not endure. This paper attempts to frame the call centre within the evolving concept of the information society to better understand its advantages and disadvantages and to investigate the changing nature of work in such a society.

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Introduction

The interior of the average call centre is a picture of homogeneity and muted stimuli. Typically, the walls and desks are enveloped in grey tones. This lack of colour, common in any office, is especially pronounced in the large open spaces of call centres—hollowed out hangars with long rows of desks and computer monitors. In one particular centre where I worked, the only text outside what one was to read on one's computer screen was painted in light blue down the large support columns throughout the call floor; various Latinate buzzwords in two-foot font meant to motivate, to boost morale in some vague way: *Inspiration, Imagination, Innovation*. There is a lack of privacy that one never quite gets used to. Viewed from certain angles, the desk rows appear to stretch out ad infinitum—never-ending screens and headsets. If there is a queue of numbers in the dialer—a computer-mediated device that modifies and feeds numbers to one's phone—and the employees are calling outbound, they do not have much time between calls to take a breather or to refine their pitch. An electronic beep sounds through the headset—the next call coming in. Just hope it's not suppertime on the other end.

Such work conditions may seem uncomfortable, and the above description romantically dystopian and overwrought, yet work in call centres is now a common job choice among a myriad of cultures with a myriad of socioeconomic backgrounds. There are call centres in most cities throughout the developed world; many smaller towns have them as well. Russell (2009) underlines the growth of the call centre industry in recent years by mentioning some surprising figures. Citing recent research, he states that Canada employed approximately half a million customer services representatives (CSRs) in 2007 while the United States employed around four million in 2005. Initially, it appears that in our increasingly technologically developed information society, the call centre industry is here to stay; Russell (2009) hits home this point by stressing that “call, contact, and ‘customer care’ centres have become the most important means of providing information services to publics in the developed economies” (p. 5). The call centre, because of its focus primarily on the insubstantial—on data and computer-mediated services and goods—is representative of the increasing commodification of information in our socioeconomic milieu, and an interesting case when examining the nature of work in the emerging information society. In its operations, managerial style, and social culture, the call centre in its current incarnation serves as a microcosm for the information society that is continually evolving in our present era.

The Information Society and Jameson's Postmodernism

There has been much discussion and debate regarding an accurate description of the information society. For the purpose of this discussion, I use information society as a general term that is at least partly analogous to sociologist Daniel Bell's theory of the post-industrial society. The definition has gone through many iterations since it was first brought to wide academic attention by Bell; indeed, it is not even clear if Bell himself was successful in constructing a complete definition of the term (Duff, 1998). Generally, Bell defined post-industrial society as "a changeover from a goods-producing society to an information or knowledge society" (Bell as cited in Harris et al., 1998, p. 3). This new post-industrial society, according to Bell, was an entirely different mode of existence, touching all aspects of the socioeconomic order. I do not agree, however, that the information, or post-industrial, society "constitutes a *total* break with the past" (Harris et al., 1998, p. 3); rather, the information society is a further evolution in our socioeconomic environment, where information and the use of communications technology becomes more prevalent and ubiquitous, yet does not totally replace labour as the "crucial variable" of society (Bell as cited in Harris et al., 1998, p. 4). Call centres for example, as representative of the information society, still use industrial labour models but combine them with the use of information technologies.

It will be useful for the purposes of this discussion to begin by placing call centres within the postmodern theoretical framework of Frederic Jameson and his work regarding the third age of capitalism. According to Jameson (2005), there have been two previous stages of capitalism and we are now in the third stage—what he calls the Third Machine Age. The Third Machine Age—the age of postmodernism—is an era defined by "machines of reproduction rather than of production" (Jameson, 2005, p. 37). Unlike the technologies of the past, which "possess a capacity for representation" (p. 36), the machines of today "have less to do with kinetic energy than with all kinds of new reproductive processes" (p. 37). One of the machines that defines our era, according to Jameson, is the computer. Jameson argues that we use the networked communication infrastructure of information technology as a metaphor to try to understand the ungraspable global system of the third age of capitalism. He writes:

the technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even

more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third age of capital itself. (p. 38)

Jameson's thesis is broad, yet his mention of a "new decentered global network" is prescient in the context of the information society. Jameson originally penned these ideas in the mid-eighties, well before the large-scale adoption of the Internet and certainly before the shared information and mutual editing of Web 2.0; yet, that sense of inundation Jameson suggests is perceptible when one faces our new information society. The call centre is representative of Jameson's networked age we now live in; that sense of bewilderment when one faces this new age is tangible throughout the call centre debate. Indeed, it is not surprising that many social theorists react to the call centre industry with a sense of confusion and anxiety. It seems that as a society, we do not yet know where to place this industry, an industry that is not completely labour-based or service-based but a kind of hybridization, a new form of work representative of an emerging form of employment in the information society.

Jameson (2005) goes further and suggests that postmodern reality may be impossible for us to cognitively or emotionally grasp, stating that we do not yet "possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace... in part because our perceptual habits were formed in that older kind of space I have called the space of high modernism" (p. 39). Jameson postulates that we may even need to evolve new organs "to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps impossible, dimensions" (p. 39) to understand and perceive this new hyperspace. I do not intend to suggest that one needs new perceptual equipment to work in call centres; however, I do think it is helpful to frame our socioeconomic moment within Jameson's postmodernity. Doing so will help one get a grounded sense of where work may be going in the information society and where call centres fit in as a new space within the information society.

Jameson's suggested anxiety regarding the inability to perceive the reality around us can be connected to the current disquiet among many theorists regarding modern society's everyday inundation with information. In their discussion of information overload, Bawden and Robinson (2009) state that "new information and communication technologies, aimed at providing rapid and convenient access to information, are themselves responsible for a high proportion of the overload effect" (p. 184). I would suggest that Jameson's "network of power and control" embodied in the third age of capitalism and in the use of information technologies, can lead to the "information pathologies" discussed by Bawden and Robinson. When mentioning Web 2.0, Bawden and Robinson outline commentators' fears that such a non-authoritative and

anonymous structure on the Web could lead not only to the loss of identity, but “the end of Western culture and civilization” (p. 186). Beer (2005) also expresses concerns regarding the loss of identity in our digital age by problematizing issues of ownership. Beer suggests that the concrete reality of the original is missing in digital reproduction: “The original, and reality, disappears in this milieu of digital technologies and information” (2005, para. 2). Beer’s argument is grounded in the theory of the simulacrum where an object, or a representation of an object, is “never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6). These cumulative fears of the loss of identity and the loss of the original creator combined with the crushing amount of information recreated on our computer screens, while not necessarily unfounded, appear to be a reaction to the Jamesonian era—an overwhelmingly and incomprehensibly large networked informational structure we now face in the information society.

Jamesonian cultural theory may seem clunky when discussing call centres; however, such spaces that rely so heavily on communications and information technology are indeed an important and tangible representation of Jameson’s postmodernity—an age defined by surface, by reproduction and simulation, and by possible identity loss. The call centre shares these aspects; it is a place where individuality can be minimized, where one can be tasked to repeat routine computer functions, where the outcome of one’s work can be difficult to quantify. As we will see, both call centre commentators and call centre workers react to these conditions with a certain amount of confusion and ambiguity. Like Jameson’s postmodern subject, huddling perplexed before the global network of the third age of capitalism and the new information age, the observer of the call centre, viewing the rows of computer screens, is unsure how to situate this new form of work in contemporary society.

The Nature of Call Centre Work

There has been much debate over the nature of work in call centres, or what Russell (2009) defines broadly as info-service work. As information becomes more viable as a commodity, the line between product and producer can be blurred. Much of the work that takes place in the call centre deals with the intangible—customer services representatives using data and figures within computer systems to book appointments for customers, to troubleshoot their technology, or to sell them additional products. Russell suggests that information-based industries like the call centre business add complexity to the various relationships within that business: “As the informational component of production increases and information assumes the status of a productive

output in its own right, work becomes more complex and at the same time is subject to great decentralization” (p. 273). To better comprehend this complexity and to better illustrate how it relates to the information society, one has to understand the operations within the typical call centre, and see what procedures, managerial hierarchies, and social dimensions separate it from traditional service or office work.

To more aptly frame the advantages and disadvantages of info-service work in the information society, it will be beneficial to look at the development of the call centre through a local lens. In Atlantic Canada, call centres have had a questionable and rocky history. Due to the “lower-than-average labor and facilities costs” (Spencer, 1998) of the Maritimes, corporations have frequently looked to the area to set up call centres. Initially thought of as a viable industry to help the suffering Maritime economy, the call centre model has generated many critics. The Frank McKenna government began engaging call centre corporations to set up shop in New Brunswick in the 1990s (Good & McFarland, 2005). The location was ripe for a new industry—the economy was suffering and Atlantic Canadian governments could use their bilingual workforce as a marketable asset. Locations like Moncton, New Brunswick represented this ideal; after the closing of the rail yards in 1988, Moncton needed an economic boost. Their move, in the mid-nineties, towards information technology as a strategy to rescue an ailing economy had come to be known as “the Moncton Miracle” (Farnsworth, 1994). Now the call centre industry employs thousands of people in cities such as Moncton, Fredericton and Saint John, as well as smaller towns like Riverview and Miramichi.

It was not long before call centres were criticized for not being the rescuer of Atlantic Canada’s slow economy the politicians initially thought they would be. Tom Good, a retired economist from St. Thomas University, spoke out in a 2001 Canadian Press article against the economic myths surrounding call centres: “provincial governments in Atlantic Canada are grasping at straws if they think call centres are the solution for regional development. Call centres intentionally base themselves in urban areas where they can access a cheap labour pool, he said” (paras. 6-7). There has been much debate regarding the extent to which call centres can rejuvenate a suffering economy. Good and McFarland (2005), in a more in-depth study of the call centre industry in New Brunswick, remain skeptical of call centres’ ability to lastingly inject life into the province’s slow economy. While they mention that “call centres now provide work for one employee in every fifteen in the province’s private sector” (p. 100), they are sure to assert that government subsidization to bring in call centres as a solution to the unemployment problem is solved only on a partial and superficial level (p. 112). Good and McFarland conclude that new Internet self-service technologies being developed by many companies now allow customers to “conveniently input data directly into company

computers to execute sales, make reservations, and conduct other business—all without the need for call centre workers as intermediaries” (p.113). Such technological developments would, according to them, flatten the call centre industry and leave only a number of small centres for specialized services (what they call a “boutique industry”). One could argue that there is always room for the human element in business and therefore self-service technologies lack the social interaction needed to completely sink an industry. However, call centres are unique in their unusual lack of sociality involved in the customer-employee transaction. As will be illustrated, much call centre work involves very specific tasks which extremely limit employee autonomy. It is not difficult, then, to imagine many of these machine-like jobs being replaced by Internet self-service technologies.

Richardson and Gillespie (2003), drawing on a case study from the Highlands of Scotland, have similar reservations about the lasting economic viability of call centres in rural areas as technology becomes more advanced. Like their Atlantic Canadian counterparts, call centres in Scotland have helped to boost an ailing economy by providing jobs for low-income rural populations. However, Richardson and Gillespie conclude that there are a number of limiting factors “including the relatively low quality of much of the work, limited career development opportunities, and not least of all the potentially limited life-span of the call center ‘industry’ as a result of further technological advances” (p. 104).

Many critics further cite the generally unfulfilling nature of call centre work as a downside that will more than likely affect its sustainability. Higgins (1996) takes a particularly critical slant on a very new industry at the time. Higgins begins with a positive enough picture of a growing industry, mentioning that “glowing reports from places like Moncton—which in recent years has attracted about a dozen call centres employing over 2,000 people—have brought an almost mythic image to the highly popular touchstone of the new economy” (Higgins, 1996, para. 4). However, he is quick to qualify such a statement with, “Popular, that is, unless you actually work in one.” Higgins interviews one ex-call-centre veteran who, in Higgins’s words, saw call centre work as “Demoralizing. Boring. Poor paying” (para. 5). Good and McFarland (2005) echo this employee sentiment, citing call centre workers who called their jobs “‘boring,’ ‘monotonous,’ and ‘mundane’” (p. 107). Ellis and Taylor (2006) cite a worker who describes one UK call centre as particularly hive-like: “you are not a person anymore; you are actually a badge number” (p. 118). The many negative views of call centres do not differ across continents—that feeling of identity loss and monotony is hardly localized. Given the variance of call centre duties, one cannot conclude with certainty

that every call centre employee shares these sentiments; many commentators may simply hand pick particularly unhappy employees for the purposes of advancing their own points and assumptions about call centre work. However, one cannot ignore in these writings the trend towards low employee morale and frequent employee complaints about the nature of the work.

Though much commentary has been negative, there have been positive voices regarding the growth of call centres both in the Maritimes and internationally. DeMont (2002) notes that the large, previously jobless, population in Atlantic Canada can now find work in the call centre industry without relocating:

Critics may complain that those are "McJobs" which relegate the sons and daughters of proud fishermen and miners to the status of lowly telephone operators serving faceless customers while supervisors listen in to monitor their performance. But talk to the mother who can earn \$25,000 as a starting salary and enjoy a decent benefits package without leaving her rural village. (p. 32)

DeMont also quotes New Brunswick's then minister in charge of business, Norm Betts, who saw the call centre model as evolving to become a venue for more challenging, multi-skilled career choices. To Betts, call centres were no longer what DeMont calls "the old-style operations— depressing sweatshops filled with poorly paid workers trying to peddle vacuum cleaners" (p. 32). Betts, like many New Brunswick politicians, remains optimistic about the state of the call centre in Atlantic Canada: "He, like so many others in the business, eschews the old 'call centre' handle altogether, preferring to label them 'customer contact centres,' which is meant to reflect the shift in the industry" (p. 32). DeMont continues by asserting that "75 per cent of call centres in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick are 'inbound' operations which receive information over the phone, through e-mails and via the Web, rather than make outgoing telemarketing calls" (p. 32). Good and McFarland (2005) make a similar judgment regarding the operational differences between inbound and outbound centres, declaring that outbound operations, versus the typically specialized inbound jobs, "represent the low end of the business with generally inferior wages and working conditions" (p. 100). Other theorists make similar distinctions, dividing the industry into three categories or models: the mass production model, the professional service model, and the various hybrids between the two extremes—the mass customization models. Each division in turn reflects the service quality of a particular call centre (Batt & Moynihan, 2002).

While writers like DeMont remain optimistic, tending to place inbound jobs within the realm of the professional service model, agents and CSRs who work in call centres may

not see such a clear dichotomy between outbound and inbound operations. Indeed, many inbound situations are just as gruelling and unfulfilling as outbound calling, involving not just booking hotel and airline reservations and providing “technical assistance to customers of some of the globe's largest computer, software and communications giants” (DeMont, 2002, p. 32); many companies that base their operations in call centres rely heavily on their CSRs “upselling” and pushing additional products and services that customers don’t initially have (and may not want). In addition, many call centres pay the same whether an employee works in an inbound or outbound campaign; the wage difference, and the skill specialization, may not be as defined as suggested by DeMont (2002) or Good and McFarland (2005). While most research on the call centre industry is accurate and informative, details such as specific work operations sometimes appear misinformed. It’s questionable whether any of the social theorists and economists writing on call centres have ever worked in one.

DeMont’s argument that many call centre jobs are moving beyond the simple and degrading monotony of the telemarketer’s cold sell is suggested further in Russell’s (2009) book, although Russell seems less naïve about their continuing benefits. Russell is not entirely uncritical of info-service work, yet he is hesitant to wholly equate call centre jobs with the direct and total managerial control and complete lack of employee autonomy associated with the theories of scientific management or Taylorism. Russell cedes the point that call centre work processes are “repetitive, routine, and highly rationalized” (p. 109); however, he argues that “they are better represented as work-integrating organizations” (p.110) and that “it is common for workers to now possess cross-team skills that allow them to work with different products and processes in their industry” (p. 128). Russell is careful in his study not to conclude that call centre work is the twenty-first century equivalent to the early twentieth-century mass-production line. Simply put, it is more complicated than that; work in call centres requires a level of communication skills and technological ability to service a multiple number of customer problems. However, Russell (2009) differentiates call centre and info-service work from the more advanced and skill-orientated notion of professional work, mentioning that in the call centre:

workers have little or no ability whatsoever to decide to do the job in a different manner from that which has been prescribed by management. Discretion is limited by standardized operating procedures and does not leverage into real autonomy over the selection of the order in which to do jobs or a choice over what tools or technologies to use in their completion. (p. 129)

Clearly, the nature of call centre work is ambiguous. On one end, some theorists place call centre CSRs as multi-skilled professionals, serving a multitude of customer queries; on the other end, CSRs are extremely limited workers operating under Taylorist work values. The most accurate representation probably places most call centres somewhere in between, within Batt and Moynihan's "mass customization model" where there is "some level of automation and process re-engineering found in mass production models, coupled with some level of attention to service quality and customer loyalty found in the professional service model" (p. 17-18). This ambiguity regarding the nature of work in the call centre is representative of the changing nature of work in our information society. In the information society, there appears to be an increasing blurring between low-level labour industries and "white-collar" professional jobs.

Call centres may provide many struggling Atlantic Canadians with jobs and give the sluggish economy a boost, but the companies seem only to stay as long as the government incentives continue to come. Eventually, many of these companies may end up going to countries such as India, where they are able to pay their CSRs even less than small-town Maritimers. Indeed, many companies basing their operations in the local call centres in Riverview, New Brunswick have come and gone—picked up shop and outsourced to an even cheaper labour market. As Good (Canadian Press, 2001; Good & McFarland, 2005) suggests, the call centre industry may be a short-term cover for the decades-long economic woes in Atlantic Canada. The history of call centres in the Maritimes is a case study in the uncertain nature of this new form of work in the information society. It is probably too early to make conclusive judgments about the history of call centres and how they will continue to develop. Call centres appear to be a natural (and perhaps unavoidable) industry that has grown out of a globalized information society. When framing the call centre as representative of the new norms of the information society, then, one has to be careful when weighing their various advantages and disadvantages.

Call Centres and the Information Society

The critical perspective taken towards call centres may represent a larger sea-change manifested in the fear and anxieties regarding the information society itself. As shown earlier, Bawden and Robinson illustrate the "pathologies" arising from a fear of the information society. Even theorists who may have seemed entirely convinced of the emerging wonders of the information society have been known to change their tune, at least to a certain extent. F. W. Lancaster, prophet of the paperless society, was certain that the information age was to come by the year 2000 and result in his concept of the "library in a desk" (Lancaster as cited in Young, 2008, p. 844). Lancaster was adamant

about librarians and information professionals taking the advent of the paperless society seriously and, as he warned them, “ignoring this fact will not cause it to go away” (as cited in Young, 2008, p. 845). Lancaster wrote a slew of books on the coming paperless society, generally hitting on the same point—proselytizing that the coming of the paperless society is an inevitability to which we will have to be willing to adapt. However, decades later, Lancaster’s initial enthusiasm ebbs, and we see shades of the kind of pathologies mentioned by Bawden and Robinson. Young (2008) writes:

He believed initially that it would be a desirable evolution, but as the years passed he has become “less enthusiastic” and “downright hostile toward” the manifestations of the electronic revolution (Lancaster, 1999, p. 48). He laments the trend toward dehumanization that can be found in many contemporary technologies. He notes that computers now usually answer his calls, and worse yet, they are starting to call him. (p. 848)

The last sentence of this passage is particularly fascinating when considering the call centre industry in the context of the information society. Lancaster almost certainly did not have call centres in mind when he made his observations; yet, such a statement is analogous to the general unease exhibited by many critics of the call centre industry. In many cases found in the literature on call centres, there appears to be a thinly veiled suggestion that call centre employees are one step away from becoming extensions of the technology they use, that their autonomy is limited and the problems they solve and the decisions they make are determined by scripts and mouse-clicks. In a word, they might as well be the computers calling Lancaster.

Although Lancaster was initially preoccupied with how a paperless society would affect the state of libraries, his predictions can apply to the workplace as well. Indeed, it is important to note that many call centres have been enforcing a “paperless environment” for years. Within the workspace of the CSRs, or on what is commonly referred to as “the call floor” or simply “the floor,” one may have a difficult time locating any paper or writing devices at all. In many call centres, paper and pens found on the person or desks of agents are grounds for disciplinary action and investigation. Such a regulation is enforced for obvious security reasons (many CSRs deal with customer credit card numbers and personal information); however, the enforcement of a paperless environment in call centres further equates such spaces with the information society.

There is a relation between the opposition among critics and proponents of the call centre and the debate among social theorists regarding the information society—a debate that has been ongoing for more than 30 years. According to Harris, Hannah, and

Harris (1998), the disagreement between social theorists regarding the information society is embodied in both parties assuming the reductionist theory of technological determinism, resulting in “the tendency for visions of the information age to be stated in totalizing terms” (p. 6). Harris et al. suggest that if technology becomes the final determining factor in socio-cultural change, then the information society will be seen either as a promise or a curse:

one of the principal explanations for the extent and intensity of the debate on the information age must be located in the technological determinism so prevalent in the essential texts in the debate, what Langdon Winner (1986) refers to as recurrent themes of “technophilia” and “technophobia”. (p. 6)

Although perhaps not as pronounced as in the information society discussion, we already see such “utopia versus dystopia” themes emerging in the call centre debate. Judging from the various commentaries discussed earlier, call centres may be one of two things. On the one hand, one can view them as a dynamic new industry that saves suffering economies and combines global customer service with cutting-edge technology. The other extreme views them as short-lived and “footloose” (Good & McFarland, 2005) projects used as governmental band-aids that robotize workers and only briefly patch up long-term economic trouble in rural and underdeveloped areas (what Richardson and Belt [2001] call less favoured regions). However, it is more cautious to suggest they are something in between—a new form of work in its infancy that harnesses new technologies while also using older production and customer service models. At any rate, the call centre will likely go through many changes, following the tide of IT innovation, and may not even be known in the future under the term “call centre.” Whether a large workforce will be needed for operations in this new form of work in the information society is another question that remains uncertain.

Conclusion

After well over a decade, both of the large call centres in my hometown of Riverview, New Brunswick are still in operation. Besides a few stores, the local shopping mall is completely overtaken by them; what used to be movie theatres and discount department stores now house wired spaces where workers take calls from, and make calls to, cities and towns all over North America. While the boom appears to be over and many clients have left for cheaper shores, there is still work to be had; at any given time, usually at least one of the call centres is hiring. In addition to myself, a number of my friends and family members have worked as CSRs in these call centres. Many of Riverview’s citizens depend on the industry and for many it would be a frightening

prospect to consider that those businesses may not always be there. The future of call centres is uncertain; however, their operations provide insights into the changing state of work in a socioeconomic environment defined by a continually developing information society. As illustrated, this new form of work is highly contested and met with considerable anxiety; yet, the industry is also touted as an economic behemoth, particularly in the context of aiding smaller communities. Disagreement among commentators ultimately confirms the industry's cloudy nature, an industry embodied in a blending of old paradigms with new, a shade of grey. As information becomes an increasingly significant part of the global economic infrastructure and communications technologies continue to advance, we have to be aware of the various advantages and disadvantages of industries like call centres to better predict how work will change in the future and how we, as subjects within the information society, will adapt.

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