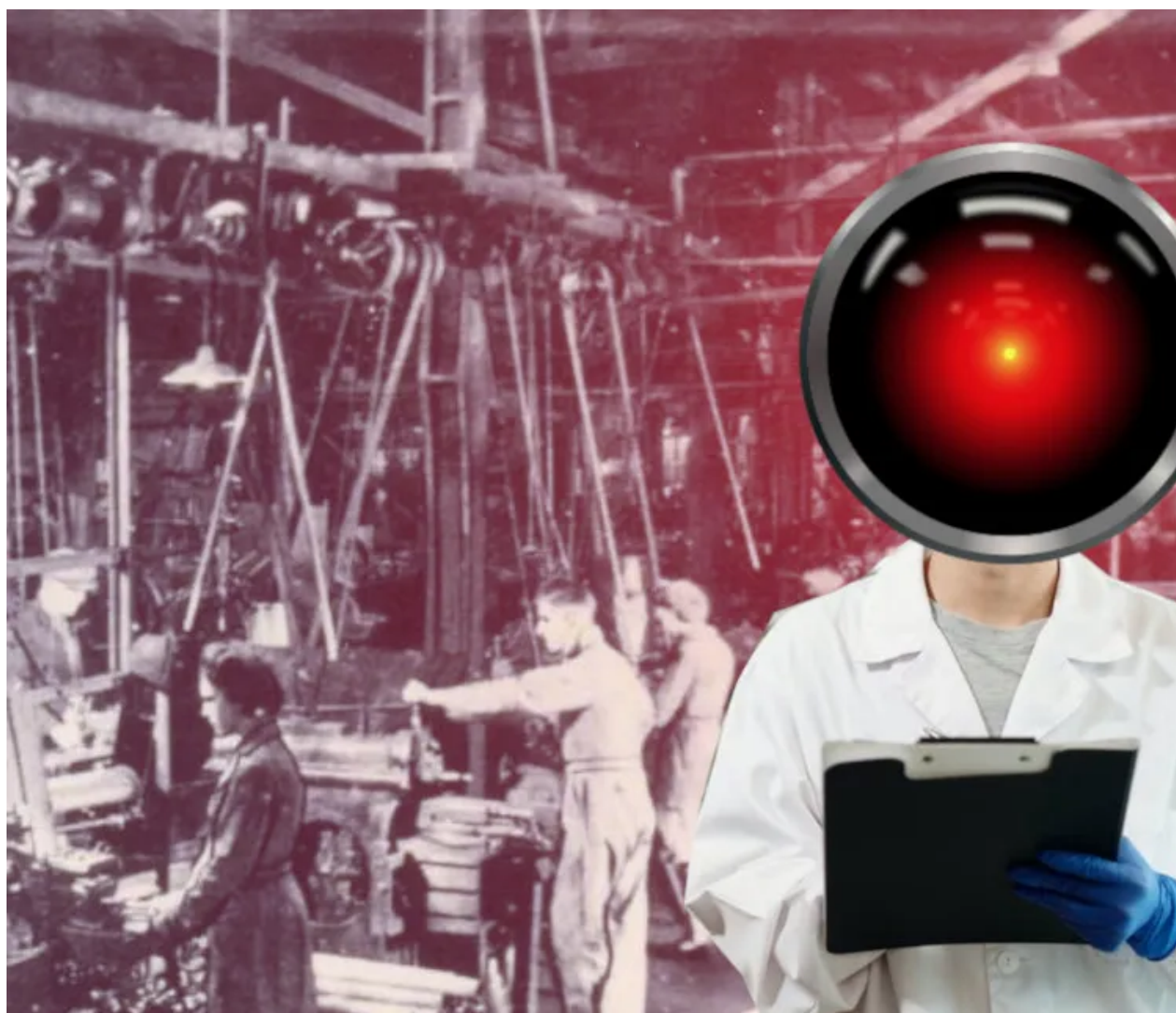


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Pluralistic: 21 Aug 2022

The Shitty Technology Adoption Curve Reaches Apogee





Today's links

- [Workplace surveillance is coming for you](#): Empricism-washing as a form of wage-theft.
- [Hey look at this](#): Delights to delectate.
- [This day in history](#): 2002, 2012
- [Colophon](#): Recent publications, upcoming/recent appearances, current writing projects, current reading



Workplace surveillance is coming for you ([permalink](#))

If you want to do something terrible with technology, you can't just roll it out on people with money and social capital. They'll complain and your idea will tank. Successful shitty tech rollouts start with people you can abuse with impunity (prisoners, kids, migrants, etc) and then work their way up the privilege gradient. I call it the Shitty Technology Adoption Curve.

The point of the Shitty Technology Adoption Curve is to normalize technological oppression, one group at a time. 20 years ago, if you were eating your dinner under the unblinking eye of a video-camera, it was because you were in a supermax prison. Now, thanks to "luxury surveillance," you can get the same experience in your middle-class home with your Google, Apple or Amazon "smart" camera. Those cameras climbed the curve, going from prisons to schools to workplaces to homes.

The pandemic was a great accelerant for late-stage capitalism, converting our homes to rent-free annexes of our employers' facilities, and turning "work from home" into "live at work." Bossware, a fringe technological category, experienced a massive boom, rocketing up the privilege gradient.

<https://pluralistic.net/2021/02/24/gwb-rumsfeld-monsters/#bossware>

For most of its history, bossware was used to police the most marginalized, oppressed workers, like the mostly Black, mostly female workforce at Arise, a company that charges workers for their own training and then fines them if they quit.

<https://pluralistic.net/2021/01/22/paperback-writer/#toothless>

But when lockdown turned high-status white collar workers into

home-workers, their bosses rolled out incredibly invasive spyware, including tools that watched them through their cameras, listened to their microphones, logged their keystrokes, scoured their hard-drives and read their text messages.

This was the second coming of Taylorism, AKA "scientific management," an early 20th Century pseudoscience practiced by high-priced, unaccountable consultants who would fan out on factory floors in literal science cosplay, including lab-coats and clipboards, and loom over workers, watching their every movement, often going so far as to film them.

Then the consultants would go back to their workplace, soup the negatives, and produce completely arbitrary workplace rules about how workers must stand, hold their limbs and heads, and move – it was a kind of corporate anti-yoga whose asanas were designed to make workers *look* productive to their bosses, who often had no idea how to perform or evaluate their jobs.

The pandemic's new Taylorists do not confine themselves to the factory floor. Thanks to digital tools, they can come right into your home, and they can take high-frequency measurements of unimportant things in great detail, and then produce scores that your boss can use to decide whether and how much to pay you.

Bossware is the subject of an *excellent New York Times* feature by Jodi Kantor, Arya Sundaram, Aliza Aufrichtig and Rumsey Taylor, which documents the ways that "Worker Productivity Scores" undermine the workers' ability to perform their jobs, while also allowing their bosses to steal their wages:

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/08/14/business/worker-productivity-tracking.html>

Their case-studies are a trip up the Shitty Tech Adoption Curve, and includes \$200/hour finance exec Carol Kraemer, who discovered

that her boss was tracking her time in 10-minute increments and docking her pay for stretches where she took her fingers off her keyboard – to think, say, or make notes with pen and paper.

Kraemer discovered that the only way to avoid wage-theft was to do "mindless busywork" that produced the clicks that her bossware demanded, even if it got in the way of her work. This is yet more proof that "you treasure what you measure," or, more formally, "any measurement becomes a target" (AKA Goodhart's Law).

The decline of worker productivity in pursuit of metrics is an inescapable failure mode of bossware. In 2020, I reported on a reader's experience working in an engineering shop where her boss evaluated her performance based on the number of trouble-tickets she closed, turning her into "a ticket-closing machine."

<https://pluralistic.net/2020/07/08/absolutely-remarkable-thing/#goodhartism>

Being an engineer, this worker applied herself to the problem in a methodical fashion, and realized that she could juke her stats by closing tickets prematurely by marking them "did not respond" – and also that she could close and re-open the same tickets over and over, racking up points.

She closed by saying, "Your execs should fucking well know this: how would THEY like to be evaluated based on, like, how many emails they send in a day? Do they believe that would be good for the business? Or would they object that they are tasked with the holistic success of the org, and that their roles are too complex to reduce to a set of metrics without context?"

The irony, of course, is that bossware is now coming for execs, and, what's more, they lack the engineering skills to optimize their work so they can get a high score *and* do the job, so they have to settle for just getting the score – and hang the job