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Social media visibility: challenges to activism

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Abstract

As activists move from alternative media platforms to commercial social media platforms, they face increasing challenges in protecting their online security and privacy. While government surveillance of activists is well-documented in scholarly research and the media, corporate surveillance of activists remains under-researched. This article examines BP's surveillance of activists who criticise the company's corporate social responsibility (CSR) programme as 'greenwashing'. In this way, it goes beyond corporations' uses of big data and instead explores how they monitor and discuss strategies for responding to the activities of individual activists in social media. It shows that while social media afford an unprecedented level of visibility for activists, it comes with the risk of being monitored by corporations. Theoretically, it draws on conceptions of visibility in social sciences and media studies as well as literature on activism and political participation in media studies. Empirically, it draws on files from BP on specific civil society individuals obtained through Subject Access Requests under the UK Data Protection Act 1998 as well as press responses from BP.

Keywords

activism, climate justice, social media, social movements, surveillance, visibility

Introduction

With their popular appeal and multimodal affordances commercial social media have reinvigorated hopes for the potential of the Internet for providing social movements with new possibilities for increased visibility. However, the proliferation of social media also provides government and corporate actors with new possibilities for monitoring social movements that they consider a potential risk. For governments, such risks are often

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construed in terms of national security (Deibert and Rohozinski, 2010; see also Pickerill, 2006). For corporations, they are construed as reputational risks (Uldam, 2013; Bennett, 2003). Government surveillance of activists is well-documented in both scholarly research and the media (Juris, 2005; Monaghan and Walby, 2012). However, corporate monitoring of social movements remains significantly under-researched (Lubbers, 2012; Pickerill, 2003). Recent research has started to address corporate organisations' uses of social media for identifying issues, contexts, events and groups that can potentially damage their reputations (Trottier and Lyon, 2012), including the predictive capabilities of 'big data' (Andrejevic, 2014; Trottier, 2012). This article sheds light on an aspect of corporate monitoring in social media that is so far under-researched: corporations' monitoring of individual activists across social media and in offline contexts. In this way, it goes beyond the different ways in which corporations process and analyse large data-sets from online sources and explores how they (1) monitor and (2) discuss strategies for responding to the activities of individual activists, specifically in social media. In this way, it focuses mainly on challenges rather than opportunities to activism and the online mediation of protest.

The ways in which companies monitor activists in social media is central to our understanding of the emancipatory potential of social media because it potentially impedes civil society actors' possibilities for holding business to account. It does so because corporate surveillance is driven by an interest in profit (Mansell, 2011). This includes companies' tracking of Internet users' activities and personal information for purposes of advertising and direct marketing (Turow, 2005). Importantly, it also entails protecting a carefully constructed brand from reputational threats posed by activists who point to discrepancies between the brand and the companies' operations and practices (Bennett, 2003). Nonetheless, the monitoring of social media for containing protest has received relatively little attention. This article contributes to the literature on surveillance of users by focusing on the case of the oil industry and climate justice activism.

The negative social and environmental consequences of high-profile disasters have rendered the oil industry a site of controversy, with civil society groups bringing companies' problematic practices into the limelight through social media (Du and Vieira, 2012; Lester and Hutchins, 2012). In response, companies have tried to protect and repair their reputation by participating in voluntary initiatives and sponsorships, typically framed as sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR; Chouliaraki and Morsing, 2010). Such initiatives have become staple elements in corporations' strife for legitimacy so as to meet the expectations of many of their stakeholders. However, such initiatives are also contested by civil society actors as greenwashing, a mechanism that serves to divert attention from social and environmental consequences of fossil fuel extraction and processing. In response, oil companies try to anticipate criticism that challenges the ethico-political purposes of their sustainability and CSR initiatives.

In exploring this aspect of corporate surveillance, this article is organised in four sections. First, it outlines the theoretical framework which draws on conceptions of (mediated) visibility and business–society interactions in the CSR literature and in media and surveillance studies. Second, the case of BP's responses to individual critics is introduced along with details about the data and methods that inform this analysis. Third, the focus of the article is contextualised by a cursory overview of contested events in the oil

industry as well as BP's sustainability and CSR initiatives, focusing on their sponsorship activities. Fourth, the analysis examines BP's responses to individual critics as management of visibility.

Social media, activism and surveillance

Social media have spurred hopes that the Internet can help civil society hold government and corporate actors to account for their operations (Bennett, 2003; Hestres, 2013a). For example, the Internet's possibilities for civil society actors to bypass mass media gatekeepers potentially enable bringing government secrets to the public domain (Cammaerts, 2013). Similarly, it potentially enables 'hold[ing] a corporate logo hostage in the media until shareholders or corporate managers regard the bad publicity as an independent threat to a carefully cultivated brand image' (Bennett, 2003: 152). However, this is a reciprocal possibility, as the Internet and its regulation facilitate both the visibility of civil society and also government and corporate monitoring, and sometimes censoring, of dissenting views (Curran et al., 2012; Pickerill, 2006).

Between visibility and surveillance: the Janus head of visibility

Thompson's (2005) notion of mediated visibility can help capture the ambiguous properties of social media. In pointing to the role of the media as key to the relation between visibility and power, Thompson (2005) departs from Foucault's notion of the panopticon and the idea that the visibility of the many works as a means of control. Instead, he argues that in our media saturated society, political actors are increasingly visible to wider publics, and that this entails both reputational opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, the media grant visibility to (media-savvy) political actors independent of spatial-temporal locales. On the other hand, the conducts of politicians are made visible in uncontrollable ways by the media. This development is augmented and made more complex by the proliferation of Internet technologies as they simultaneously provide new possibilities for staging self-representations and render political leaders increasingly vulnerable to the scrutiny of civil society actors (Thompson, 1995, 2005). These challenges are no less relevant to corporations. The Internet technologies enable civil society to expose corporate practices and misconduct to wider publics (Bennett, 2005). In this way, it is those in power, including political and corporate actors, for whom it has become more difficult to hide their activities and control the disclosure of information (Chouliaraki and Morsing, 2010; Hansen and Flyverbom, 2014). This increased synoptic visibility has brought about new reputational challenges for companies (Whelan et al., 2013). However, the Internet technologies not only make visible political and corporate actors but they also grant visibility to civil society actors. This entails potential for both empowerment and disempowerment.

In the management literature, social media are often examined in terms of reputational threats that corporations need to reduce (e.g. Schultz et al., 2013). Less corporate-centric accounts provide optimistic views of the empowering potential that social media visibility affords civil society actors vis-à-vis corporations. For example, Whelan et al. (2013) suggest that

> within social media-augmented 'public arenas of citizenship', individual citizens are empowered, relative to corporations and their (functional/formally organized) stakeholders, when it comes to creating, debating, and publicizing, CSR relevant issues. (p. 777)

While this optimism is tempered with the acknowledgement that such civic empowerment is 'partly contingent upon the corporations (and governments) who control social media (and who continue to possess significant capacities more generally) doing so in a responsible way' (Whelan et al., 2013: 786), the role of non-Information and Communication Technology (ICT) companies in influencing the empowering potential of social media remains unexplored.

In media and communication studies, corporate surveillance has been given attention in relation to ICT companies' and private security companies' surveillance of activists, often in collaboration with government agencies (Fuchs, 2013; McChesney, 2013), as well as the ways in which the Internet and its regulation often facilitate government and corporate surveillance of dissenting views (Cammaerts, 2013; Dahlgren, 2013; Hintz et al., 2017; Monaghan and Walby, 2012). However, specific cases of online corporate monitoring and censoring of activists remain few. The few examples include oil company Shell's monitoring of their critics (S)hell's posting of photos from protests against Shell (Pickerill, 2003).

The double-edged sword of social media visibility for activists

Civil society actors' exposure of corporate misconduct and inconsistencies between a company's CSR programme and business operations relies on their possibilities for visibility. The popular appeal of social media has made them key platforms for activists' circulation of calls for action and reports from protest events to wider publics (Askanius and Uldam, 2011; Neumayer et al., 2016). At the same time, this visibility enables companies and public authorities to monitor and collect information about activists' activities (Dencik et al., 2016; Trottier and Fuchs, 2015; Uldam, 2016). Consequently, social media are also key platforms for surveillance, augmenting mutual surveillance practices, with companies – or social media consultants on their behalf – tracking, for example, (potential) customers' engagement with Facebook brand pages and discussion groups (Trottier, 2012). In this way, visibility and surveillance are increasingly interlinked in social media contexts. In his discussion of visibility as a conceptual lens, for understanding social, technical and political arrangements, Brighenti (2010) proposes three 'models of visibility': (1) visibility as recognition, (2) visibility and *arcana imperii* and (3) the visibility of spectacle (p. 46). Particularly, visibility as recognition and visibility and *arcana imperii* help capture the dual capacity of visibility as both empowering and disempowering in the context of social media. Visibility as recognition points to the significance of being seen to identity formation and being acknowledged in society. Thus, issues such as poverty, class and identity politics rely on visibility to be addressed (Brighenti, 2010). Also criticism leveraged against neoliberal deregulation as in the case of Occupy Wall Street or authoritarian regimes in the Arab Spring require visibility to be recognised and influence public debate (Dahlgren, 2013). Similarly, their invisibility leads to exclusion. The second model that is particularly salient to our understanding of

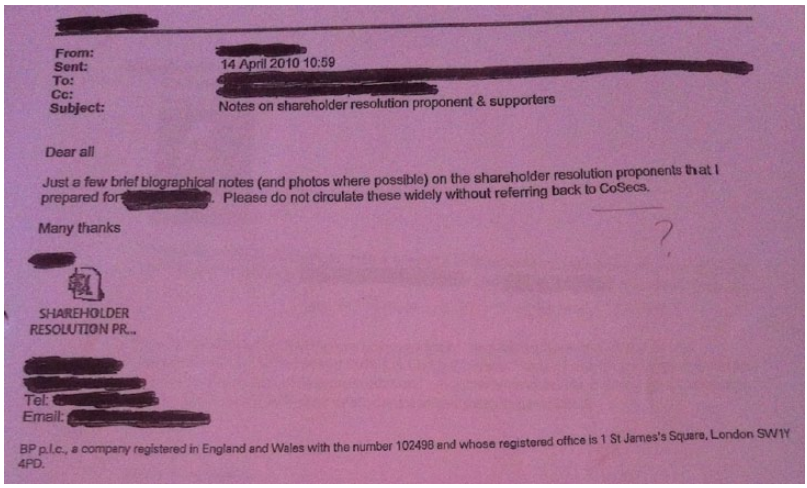
the role of social media in interactions between business and civil society actors is *arcana imperii*. *Arcana imperii* points to the role of invisibility in strengthening power. This is tied to the capacity of invisibility to hide centres and agents of power. Drawing on Foucault's work on discipline, Brighenti (2010) argues that the invisibility of the watcher to those being watched produces practices of self-discipline by instilling a sense of being suspected. This implies that the asymmetries of visibility are twofold. First, they enable centres and agents of power to exercise control over subjects through surveillance rather than force. Second, their routinisation and invisibility creates asymmetry between those aware of the surveillance and those unaware of it by obscuring exactly what is being observed, on what basis and logics and instilling uncertainty in those being watched (Brighenti, 2007).

The two models of visibility capture the empowering and disempowering potential of social media. Their empowering potential relates to their widespread use, ease of access (in some countries), no-fee access, and possibilities for bypassing mass media filters, which provides non-elite actors with new possibilities for making themselves and their causes visible to wider publics – a condition for and payoff of democratic participation (Dahlgren, 2013). Their disempowering risks relate to the interrelations of visibility and control. The visibility afforded by social media operates asymmetrically, enabling governments and corporations to monitor citizens' activities without being seen themselves (Fuchs et al., 2012). In this way, social media augment visibility asymmetries by rendering them less transparent and accountable (Brighenti, 2010). In this article, I explore how these dimensions of visibility are played out in social media by examining corporate monitoring of individual activists. In doing so, it considers both the power structures within which social media are embedded and media practices, that is, 'what are people (individuals, groups, institutions) doing in relation to media' – two interrelated and essential aspects of the role of the media in society (Couldry, 2012: 37).

The case study and methodological reflections

The study in this article draws on a variety of data related to criticism of oil companies in the United Kingdom. The material includes files on specific civil society individuals obtained through Subject Access Requests under the Data Protection Act 1998.[1] The files are based on four Subject Access Requests submitted to BP. Each file is between 14 and 28 pages and dated from April to August 2012. They contain a total of 38 emails between BP employees (including photos and links to video footage), emails sent to other critics and activist networks by the individuals who have submitted the Subject Access Requests, and a 'BP AGM 12th April 2012 Major Personality Report' with biographical information about individual critics (see Figure 1 below for an example of a BP email.

The BP files have been redacted. Particularly, names of senders and receivers are crossed out as are references to individuals other than those who have submitted SARs. Furthermore, some documents have been omitted because the requested information 'no longer exists' or might 'prejudice commercial interests'.[2] In addition to this, the study draws on conversations with activists from the climate justice movement in the United Kingdom conducted in 2013. These were part of insider participant observation (Uldam, 2016) and included conversations specifically about surveillance with 14 activists.


From:
Sent: 14 April 2010 10:59
To:
Cc:
Subject: Notes on shareholder resolution proponent & supporters

Dear all

Just a few brief biographical notes (and photos where possible) on the shareholder resolution proponents that I prepared for . Please do not circulate these widely without referring back to CoSecs.

Many thanks

SHAREHOLDER RESOLUTION PR...

Tel:
Email:

BP p.l.c., a company registered in England and Wales with the number 102498 and whose registered office is 1 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4PD.

Figure 1. BP email from April 2010, obtained from the activist who submitted the Subject Access Request to BP.

I was able to obtain the data for this study through my involvement with the climate justice movement in the United Kingdom. This double position as an activist and researcher helps gain access to insights that are otherwise hidden (Roseneil, 1995), as is often the case with corporate and governmental surveillance. However, it inevitably also entails taken-for-granted observations, as the researcher has both blind spots and shared sympathies (Plows, 2008). In this case, this has particularly had ethical implications, as activists often experience repression from those they contest (Hintz and Milan, 2010). Therefore, informed consent has been obtained from all individuals who have contributed data for this study, both in relation to Subject Access files and interviews. Furthermore, all individuals have been anonymised.

In exploring the case of BP, the article particularly focuses on the company's practices of visibility management in the United Kingdom. BP is listed on the London Stock Exchange and is a constituent of the Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTSE) 100. Therefore, much of their effort to manage their visibility vis-à-vis non-institutional actors is focused on the United Kingdom, also when it relates to issues in countries where the extraction takes place such as Nigeria (Holzer, 2008).

Controversy and visibility struggles: corporate sponsorships and activist criticism

Since the late 1990s, oil companies have tried to counter the reputational impact of social and environmental problems brought about by their operations by participating in various forms of voluntary initiatives and sponsorships, typically under the heading of sustainability and CSR (Livesey, 2001). The growing engagement of corporations in these issues reflects how the oil industry has become an arena for controversies and conflicts (Den Hond and De Bakker, 2007; Du and Vieira, 2012).

Corporate controversy: the case of the oil industry

One of the most notorious events in the oil industry is the Brent Spar incident. In 1995, Shell's plans to dump the Brent Spar oil storage platform in the North Atlantic were blocked, as Greenpeace initiated a campaign that brought the plans into the limelight (Livesey, 2001). The same year Shell was criticised for not making an effort to intervene when the Nigerian military regime of Sani Abacha executed nine Ogoni activists who had opposed Shell for exploiting their people and land and for the devastating environmental and social consequences of oil exploration and production in the Niger Delta (Livesey, 2001).

In 2010, BP was brought into the limelight when their Deepwater Horizon platform spilled 780,000 m^3 of oil into the Gulf of Mexico (Du and Vieira, 2012). Following BP's attempt to clean up the area, local communities are still experiencing oil surface in areas deemed 'clean' by BP, sickness from toxic exposure, and a collapse in fish stocks and local livelihoods. Not only major environmental and social disasters have caused controversy but also growing political and public attention to climate change, with civil society actors contesting the political economy and ethics of fossil fuel extraction more broadly. Most recently, both BP's and Shell's plans to drill in the Arctic have generated criticism.

Countering controversy: CSR and sponsorships. BP has responded to mounting criticism by establishing CSR departments, publishing sustainability reports and inviting NGOs to develop partnerships with them. The company withdrew from the Global Climate Coalition, a lobby group against reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, in 1997 (Livesey, 2001). BP was rebranded as 'bp: beyond petroleum' in 2000, intended to conjure up an image of BP as an energy company rather than just an oil company (Beder, 2002). BP also approached NGOs such as Save the Children and Oxfam to propose 'partnership' (Beder, 2002).

These CSR initiatives can be seen as part of oil companies' management of visibility. As such, they are complemented by yet another set of activities: sponsorships. The sponsorships that BP provides cover a wide range of activities, including conferences on climate change, educational initiatives, and cultural and sports related activities and events. This study focuses on sponsorships of cultural and sports related activities and events. Such sponsorships constitute a popular strategy for companies to appear as conscientious corporate citizens (Lam et al., 2013). Over the course of the last two decades, BP has been increasing its sponsorships of art and culture in the United Kingdom (Tate, 2012). In 2011, BP renewed its sponsorship of four of the United Kingdom's major cultural institutions, the British Museum, the National Portrait Gallery, the Royal Opera House and Tate Britain. Between them, the four cultural institutions will receive nearly £10 million from 2011 to 2016 (BP, 2011). BP was one of the 'Tier One' sponsors of the 2012 Olympics. In addition to this, the company sponsored the Cultural Olympiad, which included a Shakespeare Festival. The sponsorship involved the appointment of BP as Sustainability Partner of the Games. BP publicises the sponsorships as 'a meaningful contribution to society … enabling people around the country and the world to connect through the experience of outstanding exhibitions and performances, promoting ideas and encouraging creativity' (BP, 2011). Together, sustainability initiatives and sponsorships help portray oil companies such as BP as good corporate citizens that

make a positive contribution to our society. However, activists contest these initiatives as greenwashing, designed to divert attention from their business operations and their effect on people and the environment.

Visibility as recognition: activism and the empowering potential of social media

A wide variety of activist groups and networks have criticised oil companies' management of visibility, including the ways in which they have engaged with the issues of sustainability and sponsorships. The diversity of the actors can be seen as a spectrum ranging from mainstream NGOs at one end to radical groups campaigning for systemic change at the other. The mainstream end of the spectrum includes established NGOs such as Oxfam and WWF who work within existing structures of governance by lobbying, and sometimes forming partnerships with, governments, policymakers and corporations. In addition to lobbying, their repertoires for action revolve around petitions, research and aid (Den Hond and De Bakker, 2007; Mercea et al., 2016).

Towards the radical end of the spectrum of civil society groups campaigning in this area, oil companies' sustainability initiatives and sponsorships are seen as a false solution that serves to create a defence for the socially and environmentally detrimental consequences of fossil fuels. In the United Kingdom, for more than a decade, a variety of activist groups and organisations have provided critique specifically of oil companies' sponsorships, contesting them as measures to protect the companies' reputation and distract attention from controversial issues.

In bringing visibility to these practices and their consequences, the groups draw on a range of different tactics. Despite their diverse organisational and resource-related make-up, the groups collaborate on their common causes as a part of the climate justice movement. In protesting against oil sponsorships of the United Kingdom's cultural institutions and events, their repertoires for action involve creative interventions.

In 2012, these included the Greenwash Gold campaign which contested the choice of BP, Dow Chemicals and Rio Tinto as sponsors for the London 2012 Games by inviting members of the public to vote online for the worst corporate sponsor of the Olympics. It culminated with a mock award ceremony in Trafalgar Square where three activists who pretended to be corporate representatives from BP, Dow and Rio Tinto were awarded gold medals for being the worst corporate sponsors of the Olympics, before having green custard poured over their heads. Another 2012 intervention consisted of a series of pop-up performances of Shakespeare inspired scripts at the BP-sponsored Shakespeare exhibition at the British Museum and before the Royal Shakespeare Company's performances at the World Shakespeare Festival in Stratford.

The online mediation of these interventions plays a key role in reaching wider publics. To achieve this, the groups use a range of online platforms. These include both commercial and alternative online media: their websites, YouTube, Vimeo, Facebook, Twitter and Indymedia. These online platforms serve two main purposes when drawing attention to the discrepancies between oil companies' operations and their reputation construction through sponsorships: (1) to facilitate the viral circulation of visual and multimodal

documentation of actions after the event has taken place and (2) to access traditional mass media. The former relies on the capacity of social media for reaching beyond the confines of the activist community, but due to the Internet's properties as a 'pull medium' which is argued to merely connect likeminded users (Cammaerts, 2007), traditional mass media still play a central role in reaching new sympathisers and influencing public opinion. The online mediation of offline actions, such as spectacular or exceptional videos or images, can help generate mass media attention (Uldam and Askanius, 2013). This was a key aspect of the campaigns discussed here so as to ensure visibility beyond those present at the events. The best-attended interventions had up to 2500 spectators (inside the Royal Festival Hall), while some interventions had as little as a few hundred. Therefore, social media played a key role in enabling footage and photos from the interventions go viral, both in terms of numbers and reach. Without online mediation – and its uptake in traditional mass media – the interventions would remain largely unnoticed. For example, the video and tweets from the Reclaim Shakespeare Company's first guerrilla Shakespeare intervention at the Royal Shakespeare Company's performance of the Tempest in April 2012 helped gain coverage in mainstream media outlets, including the Guardian and LA Times. In this way, social media potentially enable the circulation of visual and multimodal documentation of actions so as to reach users beyond their immediate constituency of activists and access traditional mass media (Lester and Hutchins, 2012). However, this mediated visibility simultaneously enables oil companies to monitor activists' activities in these online media.

Visibility and *arcana imperii*: BP's surveillance of activists in social media

This section analyses how BP, as part of their broader projects of management of visibility, monitor activists' activities in online social media. This is often done through contracting with risk assessment and public relations (PR) agencies. One example is the risk assessment agency Exclusive Analysis.[3] Since 2003, UK-based Exclusive Analysis has been producing analyses of socio-political environments so as to 'forecast reputation risks' for a variety of sectors, including the oil and gas industry. This includes monitoring of 'online-activist stakeholders', as they are deemed 'crucial for a company's social license, primarily from a reputational risk perspective' (IHS, n.d.). In May 2012, the Head of Indicators and Warning from Exclusive Analysis contacted a freelance documentary photographer who had covered political protest in the United Kingdom for news media, including the Guardian. In the email, he described his job as 'produc[ing] objective forecasts of civil unrest in the UK'. He explained that he had been 'analysing the actions of many of the groups that you have encountered over the years', just as he had 'follow[ed] Climate Camp, Rising Tide, UK Tar Sands Network and UK Uncut and others regularly on social media' (email, 2 May 2012). This illustrates the importance that companies attach to the role of social media in their assessment of risk, including reputational risks, and that attention is paid to specific groups rather than just social movements more broadly (see Lubbers (2012) for examples of corporations employing risk analysis agencies to infiltrate and spy on specific civil society groups). While there is no

specific mention of oil companies, Exclusive Analysis specialises in providing risk assessment to the energy sector. Moreover, several of the groups that the agency monitors are concerned with issues of climate change, and with a history of criticising oil companies such as BP. The email spurred a series of subject access requests from climate justice activists in the groups mentioned. The files generated from BP on the basis of this show that this monitoring goes beyond a group level and also focuses on individuals. Furthermore, it shows that both agencies and departments within the companies monitor civil society groups and individuals.

Two strategies of management of visibility can be discerned: (1) a strategy of anticipation and (2) a strategy of containment. Both strategies work to contain criticism and thus eliminate the visibility of conflict from the public sphere. Social media constitute the main arena in which these practices of surveillance take place. In emails obtained under the Data Protection Act, BP report on the activities of their critics based on their online mediation via social media, including Vimeo and Twitter. As a cover letter from BP's Regional Privacy Adviser explains,

> BP plc collects information about you and UK Tar Sands Network from a range of publicly available sources, including Facebook and Twitter. (Letter from BP's Regional Privacy Adviser, 24 October 2012)

The focus in the material obtained through Subject Access Requests is on individual citizens rather than the general sentiment of (a particular group of) activists. The documents include information about and photos of individuals who have submitted Subject Access Requests to BP. As the empirical material presented below shows, this information monitored and recorded on social media by BP includes acceptance of Facebook invitations to protest events, appearance in footage uploaded to social media from protest events, and tweets from protest events.

Monitoring activists: anticipating the visibility of individuals

Monitoring of critics in social media as part of BP's regular stakeholder regime entails the singling out of individuals for further monitoring. This is illustrated by the two documents 'Individuals of note' and 'Major Personality Report' (see Figures 2 and 3).

The Major Personality Report from BP's 2012 annual general meeting (AGM) is compiled by the company's security division, Group Security. It contains biographical information, protest history briefs from previous BP AGMs and photos of protesters who have been ejected from or 'known to have gained entry' to the BP AGM. For example, the note on Sophie Harvey states that 'The female below is Sophie Harvey and was ejected after staging a demonstration inside the meeting. She also attended 2011 year (sic) AGM and was ejected after taking part in a protest'. The Major Personality Report and the 'Individuals of Note' document contain photos of activists from protest contexts as well as portrait photos from activists' online profiles. Much of the biographical data on individual activists seems to be circulated within BP in connection with specific events such as the AGM. The following extract from an email, sent the day before BP's 2010 AGM, illustrates this:

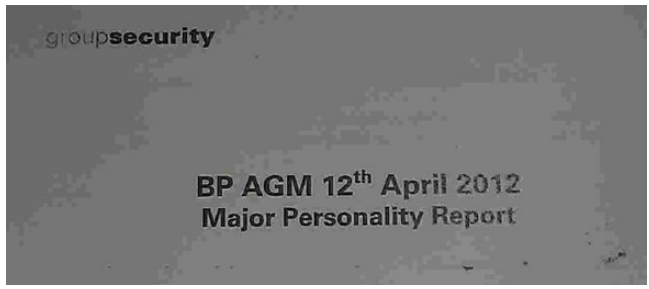


Figure 2. The front page of BP's 'Major Personality Report' 2012. Image supplied by person who has obtained the files through a Subject Access Request.

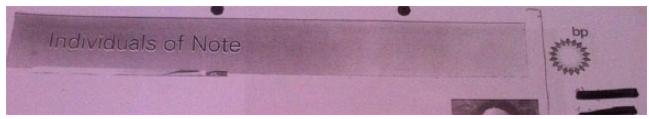


Figure 3. Snapshot from top of a profile page in BP's Individuals of Note document. Profile page supplied by person who has obtained the files through a Subject Access Request.

> Just a few biographical notes (and photos where possible) on the shareholder resolution proponents that prepared for [redacted]. Please do not circulate the widely without referring back to CoSecs.[4] (BP email from 14 April 2010, sender and receivers redacted)

The attachment to the email includes a photo of a female activist as well as biographical details, including her name, position, company, educational degree, and previous position and work place. This points towards a practice of identifying specific individuals for further monitoring.

Indeed, the Subject Access Request files also show how BP monitors known 'anti-BP protesters in relation to protest activities against other companies. This is captured in the following extract from an email with the subject line "Web footage from CON protest: anti-BP protesters present"'. The email identifies two members from the Reclaim Shakespeare Company:

> [Redacted] asked me to forward this to you – [link]. It is some web cam footage of some Counter Olympics Network protest yesterday at Wennington Green. It shows individuals who've protested against BP in the past including [anonymised name], [anonymised name], and also [anonymised name] who by all accounts was one of the individuals arrested in Trafalgar Square during the Greenwash Gold medal presentations. They give a performance of one of the 'Reclaim Shakespeare' sketches. [Anonymised name]'s Twitter account @ [anonymised] also shows that she participated in the march. (BP email from 29 July 2012, sender and receivers redacted by BP, activist names anonymised by author)

The CON protests were organised by the Counter Olympics Network to protest against the corporatisation of the Olympics. The email thus illustrates how BP's

monitoring of activists' participation extends beyond critique levelled specifically against BP to protest activities against sponsorships more generally. Furthermore, BP monitors protest events against other companies on Facebook to anticipate potential criticism levelled against the company. This is further exemplified by the following email in which BP is alerted that 'two known anti-BP activists' are on the list of 105 invited participants for a protest event organised by the campaign group Drop Dow Now and targeted against the company Dow Chemicals:

> Just in case you haven't seen, and with the discovery of Greenwash Gold leaflets in mind, I saw mention of an anti-sponsor protest planned for central London (nfd) at 0800 tomorrow, which appears to be aimed against Dow. The facebook page on the event shows that two known anti-BP activists [anonymised name] and [anonymised name] have been invited but no indication that either have accepted … Attendance looks like it will be small and no there is no indication that BP will be targeted. Might be worth keeping an eye on Twitter. (BP email from 9 August 2012, sender and receiver redacted by BP, activist names anonymised by author)

The main concern in the email is whether BP will be targeted specifically and if the protest will have a large attendance and thus increased visibility. While both these perceived risks are taken to be unlikely, the sender nonetheless suggests monitoring Twitter. While anticipating civil society criticism may serve the purpose of improving standards or engaging in debate (whether by providing counter-arguments or trying to find common ground; Den Hond and De Bakker, 2007; Whelan et al., 2013), the concern with individuals and on protests against other companies in this email exchange suggests that it also serves the purpose of preparing for the containment of the visibility of critics.

Monitoring activists: containing the visibility of individuals

In some cases, the monitoring of individuals leads to further action so as to ensure the containment of criticism. The ways in which BP's mechanisms of containment are brought into play are illustrated by the company's response to the 'f***ing the future' campaign, which attempted to subvertise billboards with BP's 'fuelling the future' advertisements in connection with BP's sponsorship of the 2012 Olympics and the Cultural Olympiad, and particularly their role as 'Sustainability Partner'. This subvertising entailed defacing the billboard ads with black paint to represent oil and substituting the slogan 'fuelling the future' with 'f***ing the future' (Figure 4).

BP took action to have first the websites f-ingthefuture.org and later f-ingthefuture.org.uk removed. The f-ingthefuture.org website was taken down following accusations from BP of 'brand infringement' (activist, November 2012, personal communication). The accusation of brand infringement highlights BP's concern with protecting a veneer of sustainability and legitimacy (Zyglidopoulos and Fleming, 2011).

It was possible for BP to have the f-ingthefuture.org website removed because the people behind the f***ing the future campaign had breached the terms of service[5] of the hosting platform (Wordpress.com) by not providing a real name and address for the site and domain name registration. Therefore, Wordpress.com administrators did not hesitate to remove the blog when BP's representatives contacted them with allegations of 'brand

Figure 4. Images from the f***ing the future website.

infringement' in relation to the website's domain name, f-ingthefuture.org (activist, November 2012, personal communication).

Responding to corporate surveillance: self-censored visibility

Activists respond to corporate monitoring of their activities in social media in numerous ways, including self-censorship which is often a precaution instilled by the dynamics of *arcana imperii* (Brighenti, 2007; Flyverbom, 2016). For the purpose of setting up a Wordpress.com website for the f***ing the future campaign, the activists behind the campaign had provided an invented name and address, as Wordpress.com has a history of handing over the identities of their bloggers.[6] This was seen as an important precaution, as authorities were clamping down on most protest activity in London in the run-up to and during the Olympic Games and the activists wanted to avoid accusations of criminal damage (activist, November 2012, personal communication). Concerns about anonymity are of central importance for activists using online media, not only in the context of the contestation of CSR and greenwashing but also more generally in a diverse range of other groups and movements such as media activists and protesters in the Arab Spring (Hintz and Milan, 2010).

BP's instruction to Wordpress to take down the f-ingthefuture.org blog illustrates what Youmans and York (2012) call a 'mismatch between the commercial logic of platforms … and the needs of activists' (p. 317). Profit-driven online platforms such as Wordpress, Facebook and YouTube rely on boosting revenue generation and access to new markets, which requires avoiding negative publicity and appealing to advertisers and a wide range of non-activist users (Youmans and York, 2012). This sometimes translates into terms of service that complicate activist uses of the platforms (Hestres, 2013b; Papacharissi and Fernback, 2005). In this way, the activists were unable to keep their identities invisible and actions visible using Wordpress.com. Moreover, using accusations of brand infringement to dispute a domain name provides an example of the co-optation of the design and operations of the Internet governance technologies (DeNardis,

2012). These interrelations between the governance and architecture of the Internet technologies, on the one hand, and visibility asymmetries, on the other hand, render invisible several aspects of the logics and mechanisms that drive social media practices. In contrast, independent platforms that rely on open source technologies and volunteer support can better disregard take down notices from companies and allow critical content to remain online. In this way, the content from the f-ingthefuture.org blog was moved to the hosting platform Network 23 with the new domain name f-ingthefuture.org.uk. Network 23 is an independent hosting platform set up by tech activists who volunteer their skills and time to help activists stay anonymous when they publicise their campaigns online – to achieve 'visible external effects cum an invisible internal core' (Brighenti, 2010: 164). The platform uses open source WordPress software but is hosted on Network 23's site rather than the commercial Wordpress.com. As the new f-ingthefuture blog appeared, BP also contacted Network 23, requesting to have it taken down (Claire Smith, interview, November 2012). However, the site's independent status enabled its administrators to circumvent this request, for example, by not keeping users' details and by continuing to host the website at https://network23.org/f-ingthefuture/.

An increasing politicisation of hackers (Deibert, 2003) has contributed to the proliferation of a wide range of 'grassroots tech groups' who provide activists with technical assistance and resources for protecting activists' online security (Milan and Hintz, 2013: 8). In the United Kingdom, one example is HacktionLab who were also involved in setting up Network 23 (https://hacktionlab.org/). However, most social justice activists more broadly do not see themselves as tech-savvy and do not engage with counter-surveillance technologies such as encryption or anonymization tools, but instead rely on the assistance of tech groups for such tasks (Dencik et al., 2016). Furthermore, grassroots tech groups and independent platforms such as HacktionLab and Network23 have very limited resources and only have the capacity to assist and host a fraction of campaigns and causes (Milan and Hintz, 2013). In this way, the current governance and architecture of social media privilege corporate and elite interests over civil society interests (Curran et al., 2012; Dahlgren, 2013; DeNardis, 2012). In the case of the f***ing the future campaign, this enabled BP to impede the circulation of the campaign's criticism and thus eliminate the visibility of disagreement from the public sphere. In the cases of the other activists monitored by BP, the company's monitoring revealed by the SAR files merely confirmed rather than shocked them. Nonetheless, the asymmetry of this visibility – that the activists do not have immediate insight into the extent and type of information compiled about them – did instil a sense of uncertainty, reinforcing caution in relation to social media visibility. While the data collected by BP did not include much information that the activists considered confidential as such, the suspicion that those employed to conduct corporate surveillance often have a background as public police or intelligence staff and continue to share information with their former colleagues in the police (see Lubbers, 2012) further reinforces caution and self-censorship among activists. As a response, the activists wanted to bring visibility to the documentation of BP's surveillance of them, for example, by sharing the files with me as an academic and with journalists. This gestures back towards visibility as recognition and the significance for activists of having the power relations at play made visible and acknowledged in society in terms of their position as watched (Brighenti, 2010) and in terms of influencing public debate

on (corporate) surveillance (Dahlgren, 2013). In this way, the interplay between regimes of visibility is central to our understanding of management of visibility, whether corporate or civic. Uncovering these interplays in relation to social media requires paying attention to power relations, discourses, practices and technological affordances in business–activist relations (Kaun and Uldam, forthcoming).

Conclusion

This article has investigated the ways in which the oil company BP monitors individual activists in social media with the purpose of impeding the circulation of their criticism to wider publics. Drawing on conceptions of visibility, it has argued that social media entail both empowering and disempowering potential. Social media can help enable activists gain visibility for their campaigns. However, social media also make activists more vulnerable by enabling companies that want to contain the visibility of their critics to do so. This poses challenges of visibility asymmetries that privilege corporate actors, as activists move from alternative/citizen media platforms (Atton, 2001; Downing, 2001; Rogriguez, 2001) to profit-driven social media.

The article contributes to research on corporate organisations' uses of 'big data' from social media for identifying (reputational) risks, demonstrating how not only governments but also companies can both instil social norms among activists and enforce these by threatening legal action (see Dutton et al., 2010). The cases of BP's surveillance of activists in this analysis should not be taken as representative of all MNCs – or all BP's interactions with civil society stakeholders for that matter. However, along with previous research on corporate surveillance of activists (Juris, 2005; Lubbers, 2012), they do gesture towards a wider response to the visibilities that social media afford. More research is needed to provide a fuller picture of these tendencies and their intersections with the Internet governance.

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Notes

1. The Data Protection Act allows individuals to request copies of personal information that UK-based organisations hold on them http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/29/contents
2. http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/29/section/7
3. Exclusive Analysis was bought by the US risk intelligence company IHS in December 2012. Now part of a 6000-people intelligence company that operates in over 30 countries, oil industry risk assessment remains a key service (IHS, n.d.).
4. CoSecs presumably refers to Corporate Security.
5. http://en.wordpress.com/tos/, as in accordance with the governance of the Internet's domain name system which requires the domain name registrar (in this case, Wild West Domains) to register the contact information of the registrant (the people behind the f***ing the future campaign), see https://www.icann.org and http://who.wildwestdomains.com
6. See http://en.flossmanuals.net/tech-tools-for-activism/anonymous-blogs-and-websites/; see Dutton et al. (2010) for a general discussion.

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