'Communities of resistance' and the use of newspaper discussion boards: Polish workers in Japanese foreign investments

Abstract

This article examines the content of two hundred posts on newspaper discussion boards by workers in a cluster of Japanese foreign investments in Poland. The conclusions are first, that the material experiences of workers generate a set of themes in relation to the labour process with regard to wages and working conditions, bullying and monitoring that exhibit similarities across countries. Second, we argue that an analysis of the discourse used is shaped by political and institutional conditions, which reveal national differences in how workers perceive and locate their exploitation. Finally, in relation to debates about workers' resistance and the use of the internet we argue that the interaction of themes related to the material experience of work are intertwined with institutionally embedded understandings of exploitation, which not only enable a shared framework for venting, but also provide the basis for a community of resistance.

Introduction

There is a growing body of literature that addresses issues related to the organisation and resistance of workers through the internet. One strand relates to the potential of the internet in trade union organisation (Upchurch and Grassman, 2015; Fitzgerald et al., 2012) and the important role that it has played in campaigning against employers (Collinson and Ackroyd, 2005). Some have argued that internet campaigning should be accorded the same status as informal or unofficial trade union activity (Carter et al., 2003; Saundry et al., 2007) and that it can stimulate more democratic discussion through 'distributed power' (Hogan et al., 2010). The most salient strand of enquiry, however, focuses on how far the internet should be considered to be a form of accommodation or resistance to poor workplace practices and conditions of employment. Drawing on the concept of communities of coping (Korczynski, 2003), Cohen and Richards (2015) characterise Facebook activity as a self-organised coping practice. In other situations it has been suggested that the use of satire and humour, and the growth of internet misbehaviour more generally (Richards, 2007; 2008; 2012), constitute a form of resistance that spills out of the workplace (Sayers and Fachira, 2015; Taylor and Bain, 2003; Richards, 2008; Schoneboom, 2007; Beard, 2002; Block, 2001).

The focus of this article is an analysis of posts on newspaper discussion boards by workers in Japanese foreign investments in the Pomerania region in the North West of Poland. By centring analysis on a less developed region in a post-communist country, this research enriches and extends the literature that has, to date, largely focused on English-speaking countries (Richards, 2008). The aims of the article are, first, to identify and analyse themes found on social media regarding the material experience of work and the labour process; and second, to explore specific discourses in relation to how workers

2

perceive and frame their exploitation, and resistance to it, in the wider political economy. The third aim of the article is to contribute to debates on worker resistance on the internet by exploring how universal material experiences of work interact with institutionally-specific perceptions of exploitation in terms of contesting or accommodating to a labour process characterised by poor working conditions and low wages. In so doing, we contribute to the literature more broadly on the experience of workers and their resistance in Poland (Kubisa, 2011; Ostrowski, 2014; Czarzasty and Owczarek, 2012; Mrozowicki and Maciejewska, 2013; Mrozowicki et al., 2009).

This analysis is carried out both through thematic analysis in order to identify the issues that are raised on these newspaper discussion boards and through an exploration of workers' perceptions of and responses to exploitation through an analysis of the discourses used. Thematic analysis organises the information gathered about the material experiences of employees in the workplace into a series of topics – in relation to wages and working conditions and in relation to experiences of bullying and monitoring. The analysis of discourse relates to exploring how workers understand and give meaning to their experience of work. In this article we draw on the perspective advanced by Alvesson and Karreman (2000) that views 'discourses as general and prevalent systems for the formation and articulation of ideas in a particular period of time' (1126). From a Foucauldian perspective, 'language, put together as discourses, arranges and naturalizes the social world in a specific way and thus informs social practices' (ibid 1127 and 1128). Therefore discourses are defined here as 'a connected set of statements, concepts and terms and expressions, which constitutes a way of talking and writing about a particular issue, thus framing the way people understand and act with respect to that issue' (Watson, 1994: 113).

We posit that the objective conditions of exploitation and competition that underpin the labour process will generate a common experience reflected in universal themes for workers across countries, but that the institutional embeddedness of work (Zukin and Dimaggio, 1990) in terms of distinct histories, values and formal institutions will manifest itself in politically and culturally distinct discourses of exploitation. We suggest that the interplay of the material experience of work and institutionally-underpinned discourses give rise to a distinct community of resistance.

The structure of the article is as follows; the next section elaborates the underpinnings of the material experience of work and the institutional influences on discourse. In particular, the labour process in Japanese firms is located in the context of the material and ideological role of foreign investment in Poland's transformation since 1990. This is followed by an outline of the context of Japanese investment in the Pomeranian region of Poland. The methodology used to analyse posts from newspaper discussion boards and their strengths and challenges in relation to their validity and the quality of data generated is then examined. The findings are reported in relation to identifying and analysing themes related to the experience of work, and through a focus on the discourses used in order to understand workers' perceptions of their exploitation. This is followed by a discussion and short conclusion.

The material experience of work and institutional influences on discourse

The material conditions of work are underpinned by the drivers of capitalism in terms of the propulsion of capital to accumulate and to compete. Intrinsic to this is the concept of exploitation, not simply as a pejorative, but defined as the necessity of capital to extract surplus value from workers that lies at the centre of the labour process. Harvey (1985

and 2001) has pointed to the way in which the search for a 'spatial fix' by firms to restore their profitability has led them to search for lower wages in other countries.

These material conditions need to be understood in the context of Poland's integration with the global economy through foreign investment. The scale of this investment, and its predisposition towards low and middle value-added activities, have been disappointing for those that accorded it with transformative powers (Hardy, 2009). The attractiveness of Poland as a site for foreign investment, however, rose substantially after its accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004. This is the context in which Japanese investors entered the Polish market gravitating toward areas removed from large agglomerations with higher than average unemployment and lower wages. This is similar to the pattern of location whereby Japanese foreign investment in manufacturing has gravitated to depressed regions in Tennessee and Kentucky in the United States, while in the United Kingdom it has gone to Wales and the North East (Garrahan and Stewart, 1992; Aaron, 1999).

Institutional influences that frame the practices of the workplace are understood, not only as employment legislation and workers' organisations (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Whitley, 2012), but also as the informal institutions of capitalism (Hodgson, 2006; Zukin and DiMaggio, 1990). These include the path-dependent norms, values and discourses of a particular society at a general level. However, these are not homogenous within countries, as institutions and discourses will be underpinned by divergent material interests and ideological positions.

Poland, as well as other post-communist economies, relied heavily on injections of foreign capital to restructure and modernise their economies after 1990. It was anticipated that this would bring tangible benefits in terms of advanced scientific and

managerial technology and good employment opportunities. Workplace practices were transformed and, under the banner of modernisation, the labour process was tightened (Hardy, 2006).

In Poland foreign investment was invested with high expectations, not only by ruling elites, but also by significant sections of workers (Hardy and Rainnie, 1996). This was most evident in the responses of the Solidarność trade union, which exhibited contradictory attitudes to foreign capital. In principle they were highly supportive of the market economy and capitalism, but were surprised by and resistant to the downsizing and poor wages and working conditions that were often associated with foreign capital (Ost, 2005; Hardy, 2009).

An important factor shaping the martyrological language of Polish workers lies in Polish historiography. The discourse of Poland as a European martyr country, often labelled the 'Christ Among Nations', has a long lineage dating from the period of partition between 1795 and 1918 when Poland was divided between Imperial Russia, Prussia and Austria (Haltof, 2012; Skarżyńska *et al.,* 2012; Wojciszke and Grzelak, 1996). After the German invasion of 1939 this image of martyrdom returned powerfully. The political divisions that followed the Second World War, which resulted in the incorporation of Poland into the Soviet bloc, continues this theme of Poland as an oppressed and occupied nation. Therefore, occupations by foreign powers (Russia, Germany and the Soviet Union) have made Polish citizens sensitive to national pride and the exploitation of Polish workers in a quasi-colonial situation (Hardy and Fitzgerald, 2010).

The research context

The focus of the research is a Japanese foreign investment cluster that comprises Kessho – a leading global brand name in consumer electronics, opened in 2007 – and its supplier

firms. This group of electronics and logistics companies created one of the biggest greenfield investments and the largest electronics cluster in Poland. The political mood towards this incoming foreign investment was receptive and positive and a Memorandum of Understanding was signed in 2006 between Kessho Manufacturing Poland, the Polish National Investment Agency, local government and the Pomeranian Investment Agency. This included long-term government support for Kessho from the Ministry of the Economy and a commitment to improving infrastructure (mainly a major motorway). The regional government agreed to exempt Kessho from taxes for land conversion from agricultural to industrial usage. In return Kessho agreed to create 3000 jobs over the period 2006 to 2010 and invest 150 million Euros by the end of 2010 (see Ministerstwo Gospodarki, 2006). However, this did not happen – at its highest point just over 2000 workers were employed by the company.[1] Despite employing many graduates, the labour process was low skilled and repetitive. Furthermore, employment was precarious as Kessho and one of the supplier firms, in particular, were heavily dependent on employment agencies, which supplied up to 50% of workers. By 2011 Kessho had only invested around 110.5 million Euros and created 1620 jobs (see Hejna, 2011) – both of which fell far short of what had been pledged.

The factories were greenfield developments, and with high unemployment and virtually no previous FDI, the Pomeranian region is part of Poland's economic periphery (Zarycki, 2016). In a local economy previously dominated by agricultural employment there was little industrial production and this was reflected in a lack of tradition of trade union organisation. However, despite the challenge to collective labour organisation posed by the predominance of precarious contracts, workers in one firm had established a branch of the trade union Solidarność.

Methodology

Although research on internet sources is still in its infancy, and there are issues regarding its methodology, conceptual underpinnings and validity, it is increasingly being drawn on as an important source of data that is gaining recognition in qualitative analysis. The online social experience manifests itself in a variety of forms; personal blogs, discussion boards, chat-rooms, listservs, wikis, and social networking sites. This study concentrates on the posts of workers on newspaper discussion boards. It focuses on *spontaneous* discourse - that is discourse produced by subjects in their everyday lives, as opposed to *induced* discourse, where a relatively high degree of control is maintained over the conditions in which they emerge, through interviews for example (Ruiz Ruiz, 2009).

In terms of consent it is assumed that individuals posting are aware that their messages can be read by others and therefore, are 'deliberately intended for public consumption' (Rodham and Gavin, 2006; Fleitas, 1998). In order to maintain anonymity, the pseudonyms that internet users adopted to post on these message boards were changed to new pseudonyms by the authors when coding the data.

Schoneboom (2011b) identifies a distinctive feature of work blogs (diaries) compared with other online forums:

> Unlike listservs and discussion forums, personal blogs are distinctive in being associated with a sole creator who is individually responsible for the form and content of the blog (19).

In contrast to studies that analysed work blogs (Richards, 2008; 2012; Schoneboom, 2007; 2011a, 2011b), the thematic and discursive analysis conducted in this study was done entirely through newspaper discussion boards. This presented some important advantages. First, they are interactive and responsive and enable the support, refutation

or elaboration of issues. Second, those posting on discussion boards are less likely to be traced. This is crucial, as work bloggers have faced disciplinary actions in the past, with workers being sacked for their online activity (Schoneboom, 2011b). Third, the large number of participants who are directly involved in posting reduces the risk of online deception as false information can quickly be flagged up, similarly to websites based on collaborative modifications (for example wiki). In contrast to personal blogs, where the author of the blog has sole responsibility for the content and is able to block comments posted by readers of the blog, users of newspaper discussion boards cannot block the entries of other users.

However, there are also shortcomings in discussion boards as a source of data. Anonymity and deindividuation may incline users to express more extreme and offensive views and statements in the cyber world than they would in face-to-face interactions (Holtz et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2002; Lea and Spears, 1991). Suler (2004) notes the phenomenon of the 'disinhibition effect'. Benign disinhibition occurs when anonymity enables internet users to be more honest, generous and kind online; they may open up to a greater degree and be prepared to share more personal information. However, toxic disinhibition may occur when anonymity enables the use of inappropriate and vulgar language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred and in some cases even threats. The use of the real names of managers and firms used in the posts suggests that they were not monitored or regulated.

The empirical data comprises an analysis of two hundred discussion board posts between 2009 and 2013. The discussion boards analysed were directly linked to ten articles about the Japanese inward investment firms published in the largest regional newspapers *Gazeta Pomorska* and *Gazeta Wyborcza Toruń.* The posts related to specific problems

raised in articles such as bullying, exploitation, and poor working conditions. As the discussion boards were hosted by newspapers, participation was open as opposed to being restricted to employees. It should be noted that some of these discussion boards were already offline by 2016.

Activity on the discussion boards increased in the years 2010-2013, as this corresponds with the intensification of production in the case study factories when output peaked and the site as a whole employed 4000 workers. The vast majority of posts are by workers who claimed that they were previous or current employees of one of the Japanese firms at the Crystal Park site. Workers either began their post by introducing their role in the given factory or used a nickname revealing their position or role (for example 'worker of company X' or 'ex-worker of company X'). Around eighty different contributors were identified and of these ten were frequent posters on the site.

Extensive debates about discourse theory are outside the scope of this article. Following Ruiz Ruiz (2009) this article draws on a sociological interpretation of discourse, which involves making connections between the discourses analysed and the social space in which they have emerged. From a sociological point of view there are three levels of analysis. *Textual* analysis enables a characterisation of the 'utterances', in this case the posts of newspaper discussion boards , and considers the discourse as an object of study.. *Contextual* analysis is understood as the space in which discourse has emerged and in which it acquires its meaning and can be understood as;

> '...intersubjective modes of perceiving the world and finding one's place in it; a process common to subjects immersed in concrete social and historical contexts.' (Ruiz Ruiz, 2009: 42).

Interpretation provides an explanation of discourse as it addresses sociological aspects and considers discourse simultaneously as information, ideology and/or social product (Ruiz Ruiz, 2009). There is, therefore, an important power element to discourses. They can be impregnated by dominant discourses projected from sources of power or they can be a mechanism of resistance that 'reveals or manifests these mechanisms of ideological domination in an attempt to overcome or eliminate them' (Ruiz Ruiz, 2009: 42).

The method for analysing the data was as follows. A first review of the posts was done through the lens of the two conceptually generated categories; the material experiences of work and institutionally underpinned themes relating to perceptions of exploitation and resistance to it. A second review of the posts identified sub-themes to organise the data. These procedures were carried out manually as software was insufficiently nuanced for analysing this spontaneous data. Some terms were easy to identify, for example references to bullying and concentration camps. However, other terms were less direct and references to resistance, work intensification and class were accessed through proxy terms or narratives. NVivo software was then used to generate the frequency with which concepts and terms were used.

Although one of the authors is a native Polish speaker, the discussion board posts were translated into English by a professional translator. Certain idiomatic expressions used in the posts are deeply embedded in Polish culture. Some of these expressions were posted on the wall of the Polish Translators Group's Facebook page (*Tłumacze z Polskiego*) along with a request for ideas (common practice among the members of the group). The translations used were the outcome of their joint contributions.

Findings

The first part of this section analyses themes that relate to the material experience of work. The second part of the section identifies and discusses discursive themes that relate to the perception and framing of exploitation. These themes are summarised in Table 1, which gives the frequency with which terms appeared in the posts.

Table 1 here

Themes relating to the material experience of work

Table 1 shows that the majority of posts were complaints about how the labour process was experienced in these workplaces. The first strand of these centres on low wages, the intensification of work, and poor working conditions. The following quote is typical of those related to complaints about poor wages and the small additional income gained from overtime;

> An eight-hour working day in this sweatshop is exhausting enough, not to mention the twelve-hour one. And to a slave, an extra 250 złoty [60 Euros] on top of peanuts is just not that significant, it does not make any difference whether I have it or not. With this extra... my family are not able to buy a new car, pay a mortgage or go for an exotic holiday. We will not even be able to buy one of the televisions I make.

The intensity of work and poor physical conditions are the subject of the excerpt below;

> We are humans. We are not robots. Sometimes I am working for two. The assembly line is 'overclocked'. 1400 sets per shift. Unbearable heat, no air-con. What kind of place is this?

Workers were unable to take toilet breaks and were pressurised into working overtime to meet production targets with adverse consequences for their health and personal lives,

with reports of fainting on the job and women facing stress in balancing work and childcare.

The second strand of themes was concerned with bullying and the surveillance of work. The following post documents how workers' behaviour is closely monitored and the climate of fear produced by the threat of redundancy.

> On the production line talking and laughing are forbidden. You can't really use the canteen, as you have to queue for ten minutes, there is not enough time to eat. Workers are forced to accept overtime, otherwise contracts are not renewed. Foremen and team leaders rush and pressure people, claiming that they work too slowly. Because we are afraid of redundancies, nobody says anything, but it means that there are roughly 220 minutes per month, which company is not paying for… This does not concern just the Kessho, but the other firms as well.

The workers' description of their experience of the labour process highlights low wages and the demand for flexible working through the widespread use of agency workers and constant use of compulsory overtime. Furthermore, the posts reveal the ratcheting up of the intensity of work in terms of speed and volume. Compliance was elicited through sanctions and warnings and the setting of strict production targets. Bullying is reported as being rife and this is particularly the case for agency workers who have no security of employment.

However, as we discuss later, these themes of low wages, poor working conditions, bullying and insecurity could be expected to transcend national boundaries and are to be found in factories in every country of the globe.

Discursive themes framing exploitation

The previous section discussed themes that related to the material experiences of workers. In this section we discuss three sets of discourses that were drawn on by workers to make sense of and frame their exploitation. These focus on firstly, martyrological narratives; secondly, discourses related to workers as resistant and resisting and thirdly, the way in which conditions of work were located in wider political processes.

Martyrological narratives

Table 1 shows that the most frequent image used in the posts was that of labour and concentration camps.

> Workers are treated like concentration camps' inmates. It is horrific that in the 21st century employees are still being treated this way. We are not some third world country. Help!

Beneath the thread the author wrote: 'Auschwitz-Birkenau–Arbeit Macht Frei' and pasted the original logo of the Japanese company. Another post used similar imagery:

> I am not a robot. I have recently received a warning because I took my phone out of my pocket to check the time. This place can be described in two words: Auschwitz Birkenau!

References to slavery were frequently made in relation to wages and working conditions. The following four excerpts make this point strongly.

> To them we are nothing more than the black slaves were to cotton plantations.

> Go to Matado then, you are going to find out how superb it is there. You slave away for 970-1,000 złoty [250 Euros] per month and no more.

> Kessho is not work, it is SLAVERY. The money is rubbish and there is lots of injustice there.

> DO NOT COME AND WORK HERE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Do not copy our mistakes. Regards from the slave.

One post elaborated this notion of slavery:

> This is a slavery, there is no time to yawn, you work constantly for eight hours, with just one break (25 minutes, this is a laugh). You are admonished if you are late by just a few seconds – unbearable heat - people are fainting. There is no way of getting a glass of water without Japanese managers and the rest of Polish foreman screaming at you.

A further image used, in the context of agency work, was that of prostitution. The workers employed by the companies are compared to 'cheap prostitutes' whose pimps (the agency) are taking the lion's share of their hard-earned pay. Three posts refer to the Japanese as exploiters in line with the notion of Polish workers being taken advantage of by external forces.

Resistant and resisting Polish workers

In contrast to martyrological narratives that suggest passivity in the face of external forces imposing a harsh work regime on workers, there were frequent discourses related to resisting and resistant Polish workers. There were strong and angry references to workers perceiving themselves as a separate class.

> Is it fair that a normal man works his a*** off for 1,100 złoty [275 Euros], and some director [real name] sits behind the desk on his a*** and earns 20 thousand?? This ******* knew what the labour market situation was and told the Japanese not to

pay more than the national minimum, because he still could guarantee employees for this kind of money. This f*** is happy, his pockets are full and people are crying, committing suicides because they are being laid off and don't have money to feed their children. This is sick.

Another post located the polarised wages of management and workers in terms of inequality of opportunity more broadly.

Yes, but not everyone has the same learning environment. This c*** [real director's name] had rich parents and he didn't have to worry about what to eat and could easily study. Others have only two options after secondary school either to go to work or steal... I hate these losers [literally rag-pickers][2], whose daddies buy them a driving licence for their 18th birthday.

Discourses of inequality and class extended beyond the workplace to wider society;

None of them understands what the majority of the society and workers, despised by the employers, go through. Instead of capitalism with the human face, we face heartless animals.

However, the posts on class and inequality were not fatalistic – the highest frequency of posts referred to the possibility of collective resistance in response to poor pay, forced overtime or bullying. This is illustrated by the following three excerpts;

I wonder [what would happen] if all departments went on strike because of pay, or just stopped working... They can't lay off all of us.

In terms of overtime, (...) people you have to unite and you have to say 'no'. They won't lay off 1,000 workers at the same time. If you are exploited, think how to

take revenge, but not through slagging off other workers. You are the base of this company, without you, the mass production here wouldn't have happened (…).

(…) People we have to do something about it [bullying]. Together we are strong and we can figure something out.

In the posts workers often 'name and shame' the 'capos' as they sometimes refer to their foremen and team leaders. In the following two posts the language of humiliation is used to describe the treatment of the worker, but also to assert that s/he can resist by 'not licking the team leader's boots' or 'accepting management's caprices'.

Most humiliating of all is to have to ask the team leader's permission to go to toilet. The team leader's opinion is taken into account when the pay rises are decided…Where are the promised bonuses? I'm sure I won't get one because I don't lick the team leader's boots as some people do.

Some of the workers openly posted about their recalcitrance and portrayed themselves as tough, individualistic and immune to workplace disciplinary policies. For example, when workers were forced to work through the Easter Holiday because their application for a holiday was refused, many of them used their entitlement to 'a day-off-on-demand' in line with the provisions of The Polish Labour Code (1974). The possible disciplinary consequences of this were considered less important than the satisfaction gained from resisting and being able to outsmart management. This is summarised in the following defiant entry;

I have handed in a day-off-on-demand form, along with almost all my work colleagues. They will probably have a [disciplinary] hearing for that, but I bet that

they won't be able to do anything to US. You can't sack us, not having enough people anyway.

Locating exploitation in wider politics

Another theme of the posts was to reflect outside of the workplace and to locate the poor experience of work in the case study firms in the wider context of government policy and the peripheral geographical location of the region. Many threads reveal a disapproval of Polish state policy towards foreign investment in general. The posts argue that the regulations are too flexible, taxes too low and that investors are only interested in taking advantage of state subsidies and low-waged workers. Further, there was an awareness of the footloose nature of electronics production and how workers in the region were locked into competition with other regions in that once subsidies were exhausted there were other subsidies and cheap workforces that could be taken advantage of, both within and outside of Poland. One post makes this point;

> In 2013 the property tax breaks and investment subsidies - 30 million Polish złoty [around 8 million Euros] - and all other subsidies will end and the firms are running away. Polish local government is falling for foreign investment, for us it's always pig in a poke [Polish: wyjść jak Zabłocki na mydle; untranslatable idiom, in a nutshell meaning the 'lost investment' or 'profitless investment'], without the government's help Poland is simply unprofitable for them anymore, and under the guise of crisis they can feed our naive politicians any lies they want to.

One post refers to inequality between poor regions and the capital city Warsaw and the apparent disinterest of national government in the consequences of the mobility of capital.

> There are always the equal and more equal… Nobody cares about us in Warsaw…
>
> No more tax breaks, and the firm will move their business elsewhere.

The peripheral status of the region and endemic high unemployment meant that there was a recognition of a difficult local labour market, with few choices for employment, making workers more vulnerable to bullying and accepting poor conditions;

> Unemployment is high, so the employer is exploiting employees as much as possible. Those who don't like it are free to go. Go ahead and resign! Ten others are queuing for your job already. So workers are grinding their teeth, biting their tongues and looking down when being bullied and get on working without a word, so they don't lose their jobs. How would they buy food for their kids when sacked, and unable to find another job with this unemployment!? LIFE SUCKS NOWADAYS!

Beyond locating exploitation in wider politics, a significant number of posts expressed an expectation of intervention by national or local government.

Taken together, these three themes reflect the way in which the framing of exploitation is institutionally specific. The language used to describe the workplace experience has its roots in Polish history. The theme of resistance reflects the tension between a lack of trade union organisation in the region's workplaces and the persistence of individual resistance. Perceptions of class and inequality are a continuation of the schism between ordinary people and the Communist Party *nomenklatura* before 1990.

Discussion

According to Richards (2008), blogging about work is a 'metaphorical punch bag', which allows workers to 'let off steam' and 'release work-related frustrations' (:102-103).

Building on this observation we suggest that the data collected enables a deeper understanding of workers' experiences in the workplace. On one level, thematic analysis yields extensive data regarding the material experience of work, while discourse analysis enables a richer understanding of how workers understand their exploitation and provide the basis for a community of resistance.

In line with the initial argument posited, we argue there is nothing distinctive and specific to Poland in the labour process-related themes identified in the posts. Exploitation is intrinsic to capitalism in terms of the need to extract surplus value from workers; this can be done by reorganising the labour process to increase productivity or more crudely by making workers work harder and more intensively. In principle this explains the existence of low wages, poor working conditions, bullying and compulsory overtime. However, the scale and form of exploitation will vary depending on the specific dynamics of the sector. The foreign investments that form the case studies are in the electronics sector, which puts workers in Kessho and its supplier factories in the front line of global competition, and translates into demands from managers for flexibility and the intensification of work. Drahokoupil et al. (2016) note that 'Electronics is an extremely dynamic sector, characterised by an ever-changing organizational structure, as well as cut-throat competition, particularly in manufacturing' (:7). Furthermore, as Pawlicki argues, '... the hierarchical governance model of the electronics manufacturing service providers (EMS) and original design manufacturers (ODM) allow brand-name companies to push cost pressures down the chain and ultimately to the weakest link, namely the workers' (Pawlicki, quoted in Drahokoupil et al., 2016: 9-10). Within this general rule the extent to which these pressures are imposed on workers will be mediated by national employment law and its enforcement, the presence and resistance of organised and individual workers and the idiosyncratic management strategies of firms.

Discourse analysis, which enables an understanding of how workers frame their experience of exploitation and their resistance to it, is institutionally specific and embedded in three ways. First, the language used to portray the experience of exploitation draws on the imagery of martyrdom; concentration camps, slavery and colonisation. This can be contextualised in Poland's history of annexation and occupation from the end of the eighteenth century to the beginning of 1990. This theme has recurred in other contexts such as the implications of outward migration, whereby richer European countries are perceived as poaching Poland's young and skilled labour (Hardy and Fitzgerald, 2010).

Second, the theme of the resisting and resistant worker can be found in accounts and narratives of work across national boundaries. As Schoneboom (2007: 419-20) suggests:

> The link between blogging and organized social change is tenuous but, considered broadly, the cumulative power of employees writing critically about the labour process may contribute to an emerging public dialogue that undermines corporate capitalist hegemony.

However, the manner in which this is framed will be dependent on the individual and collective nature of resistance to the labour process. The widespread use of agency workers and the low density of trade unions in the case study factories meant that the act of posting, as well as the refusal to comply with the edicts of management, were acts of individual resistance. However, beyond this there were frequent references to the possibility and potentiality of collective organisation and power.

Thirdly, the way in which workers situated their exploitation in the wider socio-economic context is politically and institutionally specific. There was criticism of supplicant national and regional governments that had facilitated the entry of foreign investors and

failed to hold them to the agreements that they had signed. This has strong echoes of the desire for Polish capitalism expressed by some sections of the labour movement that suggested that foreign capital had snapped up the most profitable parts of the command economy (Hardy and Rainnie, 1996; Hardy, 2009). Further, there was a regional dimension in understanding that capital was advantaged in a region that was economically underdeveloped with high and persistent unemployment and that had never recovered from the austerity and restructuring of the early period of transformation at the beginning of the 1990s.

Finally, this raises questions as to how the interaction of the material experience of the labour process and institutionally-underpinned discourses can be understood in relation to workers' resistance on the internet. An analysis of institutionally-related discourses suggests competing narratives. Fatalism and passivity are implicit in the use of martyrological language, with its references to slavery and concentration camps, as poor working conditions are imposed by external forces that are outwith their control. This post-colonial language and perception of exploitation is strongly framed by Polish history as an invaded and occupied country. However, parallel to and intertwined with post-colonial narratives and discourses are the possibility of collective power and struggle underpinned by class consciousness. Anger, resentment and resistance is a much stronger thread in the posts than references to hopelessness and resignation.

Therefore rather than accommodating to poor working conditions, a shared framing of exploitation that is historically- and institutionally-based, buttressed by discourses of class consciousness, demonstrates the existence of a shared community of resistance.

Conclusion

Although research drawing on workers' postings and blogs on the internet is still in its infancy, it has been recognised as constituting important data about the workplace experience. The contribution of this article to this growing literature is that it analyses the use of the internet by workers by drawing on their experiences in a peripheral region in a post-communist country. Not only does this extend the analysis geographically, but it enriches the literature by exploring the cultural and institutionally-underpinned dimensions of internet activity. Furthermore, the conceptual framework distinguishes between material themes and institutionally framed understandings of workers' experiences reflected in internet posts. The material dimension of workers' experiences of the labour process emphasises the dynamics of sectoral competition and how these are played out in the labour process. Institutionally-underpinned discourses provide a collective framing of workers' perceptions of their exploitation.

The findings support arguments in the existing literature in terms of the internet activity of workers constituting a self-organised coping community in response to poor working conditions and low wages (Korczynski, 2003; Cohen and Richards, 2015). The satire, humour and sarcasm used in the postings can be understood as a form of misbehaviour (Richards, 2007; 2008; 2012) whereby resistance spills out of the workplace (Sayers and Fachira, 2015; Taylor and Bain, 2003; Richards, 2008: Schoneboom, 2007; Beard, 2002; Block, 2001). However, existing contributions have been culturally and institutionally blind. The novelty of the argument presented here is that specific discourses embedded in different national contexts provide the shared understanding necessary for both establishing a coping community and the language necessary for humour and satire. Therefore, in relation to debates about workers' resistance and the use of the internet we argue that the interaction of the material experience of work is intertwined with institutionally-embedded understandings of exploitation. This not only provides a shared

23

framework for venting, but also enables an imagining of collectivity and organisation which lays the basis of a community of resistance. These insights provide a starting point for more comparative analysis across countries and enhance the tools available for analysing internet posts by workers.

---

[1] Information provided by Kessho's manager and workers during the fieldwork interviews.

[2] Discussion board quote translation: *rag-picker* (literal translation of someone who is collecting, buying and selling old rags, cloths and other waste material for a livelihood; in Polish [pol. *szmaciarz*] – considered a derogatory expression). A better translation in this context is just 'loser'.

References

Aaron, C. (1999), *The Political Economy of Japanese Foreign Direct Investment in the UK and US*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan).

Alvesson, M. and D. Karreman (2000), 'Varieties of discourse: On the study of organizations through discourse analysis', *Human Relations* **53**, 9, 1125-1149.

Beard, K. (2002), 'Internet addiction: current status and implications for employees', *Journal of Employment Counseling* **39**, 2, 2-11.

Block, W. (2001), 'Cyberslacking, business ethics and managerial economic", *Journal of Business Ethics* **33**, 3, 225-231.

Carter, C, Clegg, S. and Kornberger, M. 2003, 'The Polyphonic Spree: the case of the Liverpool Dockers' *Industrial Relations Journal*, **34**, 4, 290-304.

Cohen, N. and J. Richards (2015), ''I didn't feel like I was alone anymore' evaluating self-organised employee coping practices conducted via Facebook', *New Technology, Work and Employment* **30**, 3, 222-236.

Collinson, D.L. and S. Ackroyd (2005), 'Resistance, misbehaviour and dissent', in S. Ackroyd, R. Batt and P. Thompson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Work and Organization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 305-326.

Czarzasty, J. and D. Owczarek (2012), *Kryzys gospodarczy i dialog społeczny w Polsce* [*The Economic Crisis and Social Dialogue in Poland*] (Instytut Spraw Publicznych: Warszawa).

Drahokoupil J., R. Andrijasevic and D. Saccetto (2016), *Flexible workforces and low profit margins: electronic assembly between Europe and China* (Brussels: European Trade Union Institute).

Fitzgerald, I., J. Hardy, and M. Martinez Lucio (2012), 'The Internet, employment and Polish migrant workers: Communication, activism and competition in the new organisational spaces', *New Technology, Work and Employment* **27**, 2, 93-105.

Fleitas, J. (1998), 'Spinning tales from the world-wide web: qualitative research in an electronic environment', *Qualitative Health Research* **8**, 2, 186–191.

Garrahan, P. and P. Stewart, (1992), *The Nissan Enigma: Flexibility at Work in the Local Economy*, (London: Mansell).

Hall, P.A. and Soskice, D. (2001), *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Haltof, M. (2012), *Polish Cinema and the Holocaust: Politics and Memory* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books).

Hardy, J. (2006), 'Bending workplace institutions in transforming economies: foreign investment in Poland', *Review of International Political Economy* **13**, 1, 129-151.

Hardy, J. (2009), *Poland's New Capitalism* (London: Pluto).

Hardy, J. and I. Fitzgerald (2010), 'Negotiating 'solidarity' and internationalism: the response of Polish trade unions to migration', *Industrial Relations Journal* **41**, 4, 367-381.

Hardy, J. and A. Rainnie (1996), *Restructuring the Krakow Economy: Desperately Seeking Capitalism?* (London: Cassell Mansell).

Harvey, D. (1985), 'The Geopolitics of Capitalism', in D. Gregory and J. Urry (eds), *Social Relations and Spatial Structures* (London: Macmillan), pp. 128-163.

Harvey, D. (2001), 'Globalization and the "spatial fix."', *Geographische Revue* **2**, 23-30.

Hejna, K. (2011), 'Toruń. Sharp zatrudni na etacie 500 osób jeszcze w tym roku. [Toruń. Sharp will employ 500 people by the end of this year.] *Gazeta Pomorska*, 7 January. http://www.strefabiznesu.pomorska.pl/artykul/torun-sharp-zatrudni-na-etacie-500-osob-jeszcze-w-tym-roku-48187.html (accessed 1 August 2016).

Hodgson, G. (2006), 'What Are Institutions?', *Journal of Economic Issues* **40**, 1, 1-25.

Hogan, J., P. Nolan and M. Grieco (2010), 'Unions, technologies of co-ordination and the changing contours of globally distributed power', *Labor History* **51**, 1, 29-40.

Holtz, P., N. Kronberger and W. Wagner (2012), 'Analyzing Internet Forums. A Practical Guide', *Journal of Media Psychology* **24**, 2, 55-66.

Korczynski, M. (2003), 'Communities of Coping: Collective Emotional Labour in Service Work', *Organization* **10**, 1, 55-79.

Kubisa, J. (2011), 'Związki zawodowe pielęgniarek i położnych: w obronie jakości usług zdrowotnych' [Trade unions of nurses and midwives: in defence of the quality of healthcare], in W. Kozek (ed.) *Gra o jutro usług publicznych w Polsce* [*Public services in Poland at stake*] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego), pp. 175–192.

Lea, M. and R. Spears (1991), 'Computer-mediated communication, de-individuation and group decision making', *International Journal of Man-Machine* **39**, 283-301.

Ministerstwo Gospodarki [Ministry of Economy] (2006), 'Bezpośrednie Inwestycje Zagraniczne w Polsce według stanu na koniec 2005 roku' [Foriegn Direct Investement in Poland in the year 2005], Warszawa. https://www.mg.gov.pl/NR/rdonlyres/F91B004A-083D-439F-87CBA964981E4B5F/26756/BIZ_2005.pdf (accessed 15 May 2012).

Mrozowicki A. and M. Maciejewska (2013), 'Conflicts at Work in Poland's New Capitalism: Worker Resistance in a Flexible Work Regime', in G. Gall (ed.) *New Forms and Expressions of Conflict at Work* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 191-211.

Mrozowicki, A., V. Pulignano and G. van Hootegem (2009), 'Reinvention of Activism: A chance for Union Renewal in New Market Economies? The case of Poland', in G. Gall (ed.) *The Future of Union Organising. Building for Tomorrow* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 79-96.

Orwell, G. (2000) [1951], *Animal Farm* (London: Penguin Books).

Ost, D. (2005), *The Defeat of Solidarity. Anger and Politics in Postcommunist Europe* (New York: Cornell University Press).

Ostrowski, P. (2014), 'Searching for equilibrium in labour relations before the EU accession: Developing grassroots trade unions in private companies in Poland', *Economic and Industrial Democracy* **35**, 2, 205-223.

Pawlicki, P. (2016), 'Re-focusing and re-shifting - the constant restructuring of global production networks in the electronics industry', in J. Drahokoupil, R. Andrijasevic, and D. Saccetto (eds), *Flexible workforces and low profit margins: electronic assembly between Europe and China* (Brussels: European Trade Union Institute), pp. 21-44.

Richards, J. (2007), 'Unmediated imagery from the internet: an investigation of work blogging', paper presented at the 25th International Labour Process Conference, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, 2-4 April.

Richards, J. (2008), '"Because I need somewhere to vent": the expression of conflict through workblogs', *New Technology, Work and Employment* **23**, 1- 2, 95-109.

Richards, J. (2012), 'What has the internet ever done for employees? A review, map and research agenda', *Employee Relations* **34**, 1, 22-43.

Rodham, K. and J. Gavin (2006), 'The ethics of using the internet to collect qualitative research data', *Research Ethics Review* **2**, 3, 92–97.

Ruiz Ruiz, J. (2009), 'Sociological discourse analysis: methods and logic', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* **10,** 2. http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1298/2882%23g31 (accessed 3 March 2017).

Saundry, R., M. Stuart and V. Antcliff (2007), 'Broadcasting discontent – freelancers, trade unions and the internet', *New Technology, Work and Employment* **22**, 2, 178-191.

Sayers, J.G. and I. Fachira (2015), 'Telling Tales: online comic and gripe story-sharing by service workers about difficult customers', *New Technology, Work and Employment* **30**, 2, 128-144.

Schoneboom, A. (2007), 'Diary of a working boy: Creative resistance among anonymous workbloggers', *Ethnography* **8**, 4, 403-423.

Schoneboom, A. (2011a), 'Workblogging in a Facebook age', *Work, Employment and Society* **25**, 1, 132-40.

Schoneboom, A. (2011b), 'Sleeping giants? Fired workbloggers and labour organisation', *New Technology, Work and Employment* **26**, 1, 17-28.

Skarżyńska, K., K. Przybyła and A. Wójcik (2012), 'Grupowa martyrologia: psychologiczne źródła i konsekwencje przekonań o narodowej krzywdzie' [Group martyrdom: Psychological functions of beliefs about national victimhood], *Psychologia społeczna* **7**, 4, 335–352.

Suler, J. (2004), 'The Online Disinhibition Effect', *Cyberpsychology & Behavior* **7**, 3, 321-326.

Taylor, P. and P.M. Bain (2003), 'Subterranean worksick blues: humour as subversion in two call centres', *Organization Studies* **24**, 9, 1487-1509.

The Polish Labour Code [Ustawa z dnia 26 czerwca 1974 r. Kodeks pracy]. (1974) Dz.U. 1974 nr 24 poz. 141 [Republic of Poland Journal of Laws, 1974, No 24, Item 141].

Upchurch, M. and F. Grassman (2015), 'Striking with Social Media: The Contested (Online) Terrain of Workplace Conflict', *Organization* Online first 19th August 2015; 1–18. doi: 10.1177/1350508415598248.

Watson, T. (1994), *In search of management* (London: Routledge).

Whitley, R. (2012), 'Internationalization and the Institutional Structuring of Economic Organization: Changing Authority Relations in the Twenty-First Century', in R. Whitley and G. Morgan (eds), *Capitalisms and Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 211-236.

Williams, K.D., C.L. Govan, V. Croker, D. Tynan, M. Cruickshank and A. Lam, (2002), 'Investigations into differences between social and cyber ostracism. Group Dynamics Theory', *Research and Practice* **6**, 65-77.

Wojciszke, B. and J. Grzelak (1996), 'Feelings of being wronged among Poles: Models of experience, determinants, and consequences', *Polish Sociological Review* **2,** 114, 175-194.

Zarycki, T. (ed.) (2016), *Polska jako peryferie* [*Poland as periphery*], (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar).

Zukin, S. and P. DiMaggio (eds) (1990), *Structures of Capital: The Social Organization of the Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Table 1

Frequency of terms used in relation to the material experience of work and framing of exploitation

Themes related to the material experience of work		
		Frequency
Wages and working conditions	Low pay	17
	Exploitation	14
	Bad working conditions	10
	Cases of fainting	2
Bullying and monitoring	Bullying	15
	Compulsory overtime	7
	Work intensification	7
	Fear of redundancy and use of redundancy as a fear factor	4
Discursive themes framing exploitation		
Martyrological language	Firms compared to concentration camp	11
	Slavery	6
	Workers as robots	3
	Japanese as exploiters	3
	Prostitution	1
	National pride	1
Resistant and resisting Polish workers	Collective power, collective struggle	8

	Class consciousness	7
	Naming and shaming bad managers	7
	Self-made man	5
	Resistance	4
	Outsmarting the management	3
	Taking revenge	2
	Saying no to overtime	2
	Feeling of hopelessness	1
Locating exploitation in wider politics	Firm taking advantage of tax breaks	7
	Expecting intervention by local or national state	7
	Firm taking advantage of deprived region	5
	Poor economic situation in Poland	5

Source: Authors