Digital Taylorization of Social Service Work

Vanda N. Rideout
University of New Brunswick

Abstract: As the Canadian government shifted to a neo-liberal policy regime, social service delivery was “contracted out” to community organizations such as the Riverview Centre. The outsourcing objectives were to keep delivery costs low and to build in efficiencies by relying on new technological systems. This paper shows the problems arising from the Riverview Centre’s inadequate technology system when interfacing with advanced government networks to report on employment services provided to clients. These advanced networks centralized control of social-service labour through digital Taylorization practices. Electronic reporting tasks have been standardized and routinized such that labour processes are shaped by the digital technology systems. The delivery of employment services conceals the dual aspect of the commodification of the social workers’ labour through contract employment and technological means.

Keywords: Taylorization; Social service workers; IT policy

Résumé : En adoptant une politique néolibérale, le gouvernement canadien a transmis à des organismes communautaires tels que le centre Riverview la responsabilité de livrer les services sociaux. L’objectif de leur octroyer ces services était de faire baisser les dépenses et augmenter l’efficacité en encourageant l’adoption de nouveaux systèmes technologiques. Cet article montre les problèmes engendrés par le système technologique inadéquat du centre Riverview quand il se reliait à des réseaux gouvernementaux avancés afin d’informer le gouvernement sur les services d’emplois fournis aux clients. Ces réseaux avancés ont permis le contrôle centralisé des techniciens en assistance sociale en recourant à des pratiques de taylorisme numériques. Leurs comptes-rendus électroniques ont été standardisés et simplifiés de manière à ce que les tâches à accomplir aient été établies principalement par les systèmes technologiques numériques. En conséquence, les techniciens en assistance sociale, en fournissant des services d’emploi, ont subi la marchandisation de leurs tâches de deux manières, parce que plusieurs d’entre eux étaient des contractuels et parce que les technologies contrôlaient ce qu’ils faisaient.

Mots clés : Taylorisme; Techniciens en assistance sociale; Politiques pour les technologies de l’information

Vanda Rideout is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of New Brunswick, P.O. Box 4400, Fredericton, NB E3B 5A3. Email: vrideout@unb.ca.

©2008 Canadian Journal of Communication Corporation
Introduction

In the third edition of *Theories of the Information Society*, Webster (2006) draws our attention to the major division separating scholars and advocates studying the information age. Information-society endorsers argue that a new society has emerged from the old industrial age. Information and communication technology and digital networks play a prominent role in shaping and changing everyday life and work (see Baudrillard, 1983; Bell, 1973; Castells, 1996; Poster, 1990). The other thinkers who have also contributed to this debate do not deny the significance of information technologies, but their examinations of the information age identify the persistence of established social systems and practices, particularly regarding information/knowledge workers (Braverman, 1974; Garnham, 2004; Harvey, 1990; McKercher & Mosco, 2007; Mosco & McKercher, 2006).

The noteworthy research of Castells, an endorser of the information age, identifies the change as one to a “network society.” Of significance for the paper is Castells’ argument that informational capitalist network enterprises and the flexible net-workers who work at these businesses are able to “overcome the previous obstacles of authoritarian management and exploitative capitalism” (1996, p. 223). More precisely, the network society thesis asserts that the traditional working class has been erased successfully and the age-old division between labour and capital has been removed (Webster, 2006). Garnham’s (2004) rigorous critique of network society thesis points out that Castells’ analysis of the new net-worker is incomplete because it does not consider the separation of mental and manual labour or distinguish between types of mental labour, such as production processes, circulation, and services.

Recent critical communication research suggests that the struggle between capital, the state, and labour is ongoing and finds that managerial control of information-age knowledge workers continues to rely on scientific managerial models and advanced information technology systems. For example, Lui (2006) and McKercher (2002), researching the impact of information technologies on the workplace, have found increased workloads, enhanced managerial control over work processes, and layoffs of newspaper reporters. Brophy’s (2006) research into precarious high-tech workers at Microsoft shows that as the corporation matured, management’s control strategies became more routinized and stratified, and labour was de-skilled to a form of technical factory work. Similarly, Huws’ (2003) study of call-centre workers who provide a range of services, including selling airline tickets, dealing with insurance claims, and trouble-shooting software problems, found these knowledge workers had also undergone Taylorization and de-skilling.

Current social-service sector research provides further evidence of the broadening of digital Taylorization practices. The study by Head (2003) demonstrates how highly skilled physicians are subject to the discipline of Taylorist practices at managed care organizations in the digital age. The situation facing electronic social-service workers in the United States and Canada is similar to that described in the communication labour research, revealing a steady transfer of skills to digital systems and the Taylorization of social-service labour (Baines, 2006; Rideout, 2007; Rodino-Colocino, 2006).
The Riverview Centre case study discussed in this paper uses the commodification of labour concept to examine social-service workers who provide employment services for citizens. The paper investigates the real world of local knowledge workers who provide job placement services for mentally disabled clients at an urban Canadian community centre. It argues that a) the centre’s outdated technology system makes it difficult for the social-service workers to interface with the advanced government technologies; b) the restructuring of Canadian labour-market legislation and sophisticated government information technology networks help deepen and extend digital Taylorization practices to the social-service workers and their clients; and c) inadequate contract funding and staffing make it difficult for information age social-service workers to do their jobs, with or without information communication technologies.

The Riverview Centre case study examined how staff members used advanced information and communication technologies to deliver employment-related services to clients. Several data-collection techniques were used to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the daily experiences of the workers who provide client employment services. Seven mental health workers and employment specialists took part in in-depth interviews, and a focus-group discussion was held with six outreach social-service workers. The clients’ points of view were obtained from 96 completed survey questionnaires and from a 10-client focus group. The centre’s staff helped the author select a representative client sample for the questionnaire and the focus panel, based on income level, gender, age, and ethnicity.

This paper uses a political-economy perspective as a guide to help explain the results of the study. The analysis supports Mosco’s (2004) assertion that advanced information-age electronic government service systems and accompanying websites expand the process of commodifying labour. An advanced provincial-government computer management network broadens and extends scientific management practices at the Riverview Centre by measuring and quantifying the social workers’ delivery of employment services. An employee-monitoring software system evaluates service work outputs and de-skills social workers’ work. A federal government digital employment-service network monitors client job searches.

**Commodification of labour**

The Marxian concept of the commodification of labour originates with capital’s purchase of two commodities: the means of production and labour power. The commodification of labour objectifies exploitative social relations, as Mosco elucidates, “presenting them in a congealed form that naturalizes them” (1996, p. 143). Braverman’s (1974) contribution to our understanding of the commodification of labour is based on his empirical examination of this process in the service and information sectors. Capital separates the conception of a task from its execution. The introduction of new technologies and scientific management practices extends control over the workplace and de-skills the workers. When these practices are applied to the social-service sector, the degradation of labour occurs through routinization, simplification, and standardization.

Information-age employers extend the commodification of labour processes by increasing their use of communication systems and technologies, transform-
ing most aspects of work into an extension of a management information system (McKercher, 2002; Mosco, 1996). Employers also make distinctions between education and training to expand the commodification of labour processes. Education is a process by which individuals learn to analyze, criticize, synthesize, and integrate knowledge for their own use. By contrast, training is a set of skills that has operational use that is determined by someone other than the trained person (Noble, 2001).

Harvey’s (1990) investigation of post-Fordist capitalism highlights the importance of knowledge and information as commodities. Employers gain an advantage by tightening control over knowledge commodities and labour through technological innovations. In addition, labour markets are re-organized to become more flexible by relying on part-time and contract work arrangements in place of full-time, permanent workers. Harvey also explains that contracting arrangements are particularly enticing to the state because work that was internalized within the government formerly can now be “hived off to communities” (p. 157).

Similar neo-liberal regulatory reforms that occurred in telecommunication policy in Canada and the United States (Rideout, 2003) also reshaped labour markets and social services. “Workfare” is the term used by critics of neo-liberal states such as Canada and the United States that introduced systems of labour regulation to enforce the new conditions of work in the post-Fordist knowledge economies (Peck, 2001). Changes to labour-market and unemployment-insurance policies are the key elements in the shift from the Keynesian welfare paradigm to the “workfare . . . state” (Johnson & Mahon, 2005, p. 13). Workfare reform links unemployment and social-assistance benefits to work, training, or other programs that are designed to coerce or empower the unemployed to enter the labour market. The primary objective of workfare labour markets is to ensure labour markets are flexible and self-reliant for the new economy. Workfare rules ensure the reproduction of a contingent work force by setting the terms and tone of low-wage employment relationships (Peck, 2001). Downward pressure is also placed on unemployment and other social wages so that work-based welfare reform fits into the broader context of neo-liberal economies and globalization (Jessop, 2002).

Workfare policy changes in Canada involved the re-commodification of the labour market by re-classifying people who were previously considered unemployable—such as the disabled and single parents—as employable (Bashevkin, 2002; Jenson & Saint-Martin, 2003; Peck, 2001). Federal and provincial government employability programs emphasize work activism, skills development and upgrades to address competency gaps through education and training. Participation in these programs is compulsory for all people receiving social-assistance benefits or employment insurance (Quail, 2002). In essence, workfare policy links social-assistance and unemployment benefits to work and programs that are designed to coerce or empower the unemployed to enter the labour market.

**Deepening labour commodification with government advanced technologies**

Mosco & McKercher assert that “digitization has the technological advantage of providing enormous gains in transmission speed and flexibility over earlier forms
of electronic communication” (2006, p. 734) by expanding the commodity form to the delivery of services and information. Without exception, governments have made significant investments in advanced technological networks and systems to provide public services to citizens (Accenture 2005; Rideout, 2007).

Incorporating free-market principles into the public-service domain, Canadian provincial and federal governments rely on advanced electronic technologies to extend the commodity form to the delivery of social services. Most of the provincial governments have realized major cost savings by contracting out delivery of social services, which were formerly provided internally, to outside organizations. For the most part, service delivery is outsourced on a contract basis to community non-profit organizations4 (O’Brien, 2006).

In a move reminiscent of the “administrative discipline known as information resource management” (Schiller, 2007, p. 3) used in businesses, Canadian provincial governments have extended an administrative discipline to the organizations that deliver social services with “new public management” (Baines 2006; Richmond & Shields, 2004). New public management policy’s heavy reliance on advanced technologies ensures public accountability, social-service cost reductions, and efficiency improvements in the delivery of public services. Computer-based case management monitoring systems process the statistical information provided by a community organization and link it to fee-for-service funding. The employment-based monitoring software systems measure and evaluate a social-service worker’s output. This electronic supervision includes Taylorized timed tasks and performance goals, which reduces the professional discretion of the social-service workers and de-skills them at the same time (Baines, 2006). An electronic client-needs-assessment form uses check-boxes to identify the number of service hours to which a client is entitled. This dictates the social worker’s service options (Baines, 2006).

Throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, the Canadian government has invested heavily in advanced, innovative technologies and digital networks (Rideout, 2007). The key rationale for a recent investment of nearly $1 billion in Service Canada’s “Government On-Line” system was to provide “client driven access” to electronic services and to improve government efficiency (Canada, 2006, p. 2). Mosco & McKercher point out that such advanced networks also have “the technological advantage of providing enormous gains in transmission speed and flexibility,” and at the same time, they can be used to “expand the commodification of information” (2006, p. 735).

By 2002, Human Resources Development Canada (now known as Human Resources and Social Development Canada) had begun providing labour-market and employment-insurance services online to individuals and businesses. A Web-based network of Canadian job postings is available at an online job bank. The Electronic Labour Exchange website permits people looking for work to identify their skills, education, and work experience in the hope that their credentials will interest an employer. Those who receive employment insurance (EI) benefits or other forms of social assistance must report all work and work-related activity. This can only be done on the digital employment-insurance system (Canada, 2006; Treasury Board of Canada, 2003).
Riverview Centre case study

The Riverview Centre was formed in 1976 by a coalition of mental health professionals, community leaders, and parents with mentally ill children to accommodate the hundreds of patients who were released at the time as a result of the provincial government’s decision to de-institutionalize provincial psychiatric hospitals. The centre provides services and support for people with mental disability and illness. Its mandate has changed based on government requirements that its offerings expand to include services for homeless people and people with concurrent disorders, such as mental health and substance abuse.

Located in a medium-sized city, the centre serves approximately 300 clients. A total of 24 staff, including social-service workers with expertise in mental health, employment specialists, outreach service specialists, and program coordinators, deliver the employment services. As a result of recent changes in how the centre is provincially funded, emphasis is placed on helping clients find paid permanent, temporary, or casual employment. Services range from vocational training to job coaching and job placement. The centre also provides a venue for client social interaction.

The majority of the centre’s clients are between 35 and 55 years old. Clients’ income levels are low, from $5,000 to $15,000 per year, which means many are living in poverty (Rideout, Reddick, O’Donnell, McIver, Jr., Kitchen, & Milliken, 2006). Some clients are so poor they cannot afford to pay for public transportation to visit the centre.

Although client needs are primarily employment-related, the centre also addresses learning and social needs. Basic human and social needs include food, income, and housing security. Many clients have cognitive impairments and learning difficulties, and some have psychiatric conditions. All of the service workers agree that delivering client services appropriately requires more energy and time than they have available (Staff focus group discussion, Riverview Centre Field Report, 2005).

In addition to mental disabilities, the workers identified illiteracy, hearing, and physical disabilities as possible barriers to the services the centre provides. For example, clients with literacy barriers required additional levels of service from the social workers, such as verbal explanations and the reading of written documents and forms. One worker explained that the clients need “a place of acceptance, of non-judgment, and just a place that gives them an opportunity to go forward in their life” (Staff focus group discussion, Riverview Centre Field Report, 2005). The clients reiterated that the Riverview Centre and its social-service workers address their needs by providing a supportive atmosphere and moral support: “We come here and there is people to talk to. I mean there is a lot of people that the minute they find out that you are mentally ill they don’t want to talk to you at all” (Client focus discussion, Riverview Centre Field Report, 2005).

Insufficient funding

With the introduction of neo-liberal budgets at federal and provincial levels in the late 1980s, social-service organizations were required “to meet increased social demand with fewer financial resources” (Baines, 2006, p. 195). Provincial and federal governments restructured non-profit social-service organizations by shifting
away from core funding toward competitive tendered service contracts (Richmond & Shields, 2004). In essence, this contracting out of “public services” transferred the delivery responsibilities away from governments to community organizations as a means of “providing efficient services while keep service costs low” (O’Brien, 2006, p. 70)—to get the best bang for the buck. Efficiency and accountability requirements were introduced into service contracts in order to quantify the activity and output of the social-service workers (Baines, 2006, p. 200).

The social-service-sector restructuring at the Riverview Centre has resulted in major funding cuts from its primary funder: a provincial health and long-term-care department and Human Resources and Social Development Canada. Sustainable or core long-term methods of funding have been reduced significantly and replaced with project-based fee-for-service funding. The funders impose administrative control on the service workers by having them submit extensive information and statistics detailing client-service deliveries. As discussed in greater detail below, the tensions resulting from the digital Taylorization of social-service work have proven to be more of a burden. As a result of the shift from core to fee-for-service funding, the centre’s operating revenues were reduced by almost 50%.

The Riverview Centre has obtained provincial government contracts to deliver employment-support services to its mentally disabled clients. Although the centre still receives approximately $600,000 in core funding from the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, this is reduced significantly from previous years. A provincial government contract provides disability-employment-support services on a fee-for-service basis. A second contract, with Human Resources and Social Development Canada, called for proposals to deliver employment services. Interestingly enough, the call for proposals was structured to enable competition between non-profit and for-profit organizations (Community Social Services Campaign, 2007). The federal Job Quest third contract provides outreach services to people who are homeless and at risk of homelessness, also on a fee-for-service basis. Finally, the centre receives annual core funding of $95,000 from the municipal government to deliver social and health services. However, repeated threats to withdraw this funding have been made.

Attempts to overcome the financial shortfall include applying for one-time grants. “We write probably 25 to 35 grants every year for all sorts of things. So if we find a fund, that could be a pharmaceutical company, it could be anything, if we think we can get money, we’ll try and make the time and write the grants” (Staff interview two, Riverview Centre, 2005). Workers found the constant grant-writing to be very time consuming considering the poor return on the investment, which only resulted in a 15% success rate. At the time the field research was conducted, the centre had five outstanding proposals with Human Resources and Social Development Canada. Although the centre contacted the department a number of times to inquire about the status of the proposals, it received no response.

Often the service workers want to refer clients to other non-government services, but many of these local services have also been cut. What is needed is more information about existing services provided by other organizations in the region;
however, many of the information resources on local services are out of date, presumably for the same reason that many of the centre’s own information resources are out of date: there are neither the funds nor the time to update them.

**Working with an inadequate technology network**

The government’s fee-for-service funding regime only provides funding for the delivery of employment-related services. It is intended to cover basic operating expenses for wages, rent, and administration. The expenses that are not covered under the funding formulas include infrastructure and technology expenses. The government funders exclude expenses for information communication technology, up-to-date computers, and other hardware, software, and maintenance costs. Most of the computers have been donated from private-foundation grants, but they are often out of date by the time the centre receives them. These older computers are incapable of running newer versions of basic software or have inadequate memory for the centre’s client databases. There are only two Pentium IV computers with Windows XP operating software. The remaining computers run on Office 2000 software, making it difficult to access information on the provincial and federal government websites. Employment and information searches can often take up to 45 minutes using the older computers. Using the older computers to report on client cases is very time consuming.

Some of the workers would like the centre to purchase case-writing software, because they believe it would give them more time to interact with the clients and improve service efficiency. Although these workers considered the benefits of case-writing software, they were not aware that the software could de-skill their work by breaking it down into smaller, routinized components, making them more likely to reach service-delivery target goals. The study indicates that the importation of technology does not guarantee digitization. If anything, it demonstrates another manifestation of the digital divide in terms of de-skilling and lack of resources.

The service workers described the centre’s hardware and software situation as inadequate and chaotic. There is no central server, and computer crashes are common. Some days the computers do not work, and nobody knows why. Before a reliable local area network could be put in place to link all of the centre’s computers, a major investment of $50,000 would be required to upgrade the centre’s current electrical power service. The cost of delivering employment services should include improving the electrical and network systems.

Many of the service workers do not have the troubleshooting skills to deal with common computer glitches, adding to the general stress levels and time pressures. One worker explained that most people who work in the social-service sector do not have updated information technology skills. The workers agree that they need information technology skill upgrading and training to become more computer literate (Staff focus group discussion, Riverview Centre, 2005). However, there are few funds and little time available to train them. Some service workers lack basic information technology skills, such as knowing how to organize conference calls or do PowerPoint presentations. The inadequate funding situation also makes it difficult to hire an information technology support worker, when it would be at the expense of laying off another social worker.
The precarious and inadequate funding level has made information communication technologies a low funding priority for the centre, making it difficult to find funding sources for computer support, ongoing maintenance, hardware and software, and upgrades for basic computers and the telephone system.

The telephone system is old, with not enough telephones or extensions. There is a limited local area network, but it only links four computers. Not all service workers or staff members have a computer or access to a computer or email. It is also not possible to send an internal email to all the workers. The estimate the centre received to upgrade the telephone and LAN systems in 2005 was $10,000.

Two outreach workers rely extensively on cellphone (mobile) technology to contact clients, doctors, health care providers, hospitals, and other social-service agencies. These workers do not, however, have access to the centre’s computers or email. The outlay for the cellphones and the monthly service-package fees is affordable compared with expensive, advanced wireless technologies that combine Internet and telephone communications.

The service workers expressed concerns about the confidentiality of digital files. Currently the centre does not have the computer software required to ensure the privacy and security of very sensitive client information.

These limited technological resources are far from state of the art and are breaking down constantly, yet the centre is required to interface with advanced government systems and networks.

The de-skilling of social-service work is reinforced by the centre’s lack of resources for information technology training and skills upgrading; this takes place in a number of other ways that are discussed in the next section.

Contract labour and digital Taylorization of social-service work

All of the social-service workers at the Riverview Centre are hired on a year-to-year contract basis. These contract employment arrangements have led to a more transient workplace with little corporate loyalty. Workers’ salaries are not competitive, because the provincial government funding does not augment the salary rates. Social-service workers with a diploma or a degree in social work are unionized members of the Canadian Union for Public Employees (CUPE). At the time the field research was being conducted, the unionized workers received a 3% salary increase, their first increase in 12 years. Not surprisingly, many of the service workers who hold recognized degrees in social work or community college diplomas only work at the centre for a short period of time and then move to another job.

The social-service workers without credentials are not represented by an association and they are not members of CUPE or another union. They complained of the lower wages they receive compared with the unionized workers, despite having university degrees and more social-service work experience. These workers received a 2% salary increase, the first one in 8 years. The social-service workers’ expert knowledge is consequently devalued through wage stratification and credentialism.

The short duration of project funding means that job insecurity is widespread, resulting in service workers who are on short-term contracts—two-week contracts were mentioned. All of the social-service workers are under a lot of stress,
because they are underpaid, overworked, and have no employment security, making it impossible to create a healthy, learning work environment where the workers can upgrade their social-service skills.

The recent *Heads Up Ontario!* report in support of the Community Social Service Campaign, sponsored by CUPE, other public-service unions, community centres, and social-action associations, supplies extensive evidence indicating that the situation of organizations like the Riverview Centre represents working conditions throughout the sector. There has been an increased reliance by governments on the sector to deliver client services, yet governments have underfunded social programs and social-service workers’ wages persistently. Furthermore, the administrative infrastructure of community organizations, including information technology, has been hollowed out to stretch limited resources. The report identifies the stark reality facing Canada’s social-service sector as one of the most dependent on part-time precarious work arrangements.

The shift to fee-for-service funding has resulted in a major downsizing of social-service workers. Originally over 15 job-placement workers worked with the higher-needs clientele at the Riverview Centre, providing them with unlimited employment coaching and job placement. As a result of the shift to fee-for-service program delivery, the job-placement team has been reduced to three. Only two of the previous five outreach workers provide Job Quest services to an increasing rank of homeless people:

It has just been cut down, and so basically it is work with individuals who don’t have as many needs and that can start working ASAP, and they don’t need me to be going to work and supporting them there. Which is sad because it would be a much more effective service if we could provide all the services that we said that we were going to originally. But since funding has been cut, we have been cut—everything just keeps getting cut. (Social-worker interview four Riverview Centre, 2005)

According to the service workers, when one of them is laid off, there is usually a subsequent decrease in services to the clients. The workers also explained that one of the worst things that a mental health agency can experience is continuous worker turnover. Turnover disrupts the important relationships that develop between the client and the service worker. If clients are in a period of heightened mental illness, when these relationships dissolve, they withdraw from society and are not able to work.

The employment-service workers expressed frustration at the overall situation related to their contract insecurity. The fee-for-service funding model means more of the workers’ time is spent on administrative tasks, rather than addressing client needs. The resentment over their contingent contract-work arrangements is part of an awareness of information-age structural inequalities. These include, but are not limited to, changes in labour-market policies and government contract employers with an overemphasis on cost reductions, which signals a broader retreat from public-services support (Rodico-Colocino, 2006).

The service workers view the funding change as “almost a privatization of the not-for-profit sector” (Staff interview one, Riverview Centre, 2005). Both provincial- and federal-government funders impose extensive accountability
mechanisms and procedures with measurable targets and goals that the workers are expected to achieve. The provincial government funders require information on service outcomes. In order to provide the required information, the centre has put together the only system it can afford: an inadequate patchwork of databases, computers, and software technologies.

The databases in particular are, according to one worker, “a nightmare” (Social-worker interview three, River Centre, 2005). The information required by the health and long-term care department that measures contract targets is kept on one of the databases. This database keeps track of and submits all data on individual client employment placements. One of the measurements is a client’s employment retention record. This information must be broken down into intervals of zero to three months, three to six months, and so on. The workers also explained that specific employment services have different funding amounts attached to their delivery. For example, obtaining an interview has one service rate, finding a job for a client has another rate, and a different service fee is attached to clients who obtain paid employment. The services that are provided for unpaid employment are different again.

A second database stores client demographic information for another branch of the department of health. Both databases crash often and have been infected with viruses. One service worker explained that when the databases crash, they lose important statistical information. The technical problems with this jury-rigged system are enormous. Consequently, the workers maintain a parallel manual system, which results in a double workload. The situation facing these social-service workers is not unique. Provincial social-service workers in other provinces often keep four sets of statistics on every client interaction (Baines 2004). This leaves less time to interact helpfully with clients and is the source of discontent and frustration among the social-service workers.

The service workers were unanimous that throughout the past decade, both the provincial and federal government funders have redefined the social services they provide. They explained that despite great efforts to reach government service-delivery standards and goals, there was never enough time to provide the clients with quality service (Staff focus group discussion, Riverview Centre, 2005). New public management’s reliance on information technologies has broken down social-service work into smaller components and routinized their work, making it easier to reach contract target goals. But many of the service workers were aware that their work had been fragmented and standardized at the expense of meeting the clients’ needs. Often the workers try to find small ways to eek out quality service for their clients.

Many service workers believe that the government funders are only interested in obtaining contract accountability information, not providing social services to mentally disabled clients. One worker said in frustration,

working with government, everything is just a number. You always have to have those numbers in place to keep track of who gets interviews, who gets job placements, who is utilizing the centre, and how many people use the computers. (Social-worker interview four, Riverview Centre, 2005)
As far as the workers were concerned, the monthly client reports were no more than “success stories” about the clients who found any employment.

The situation facing the social-service workers is similar to scholars studying the impact of information communication technologies on the workplace. Findings include increased workloads, enhanced managerial control over the work process, and subsequent job losses (Liu, 2006).

As discussed previously, computer-based case-management software determines service options, whereas information technology monitoring packages perform electronic supervision on all social-service work. This electronic monitoring can be cross-tabulated to contract targets, a worker’s performance goals, and a client’s employment-search activity. By combining information technologies with new government administrative policies, government funders deepen and extend managerial control of social-service work by measuring the productivity of the social-service workers and tightening surveillance practices digitally (Mosco & McKercher, 2006).

Client training

Only a few Riverview Centre clients are able to conduct their own job searches on the federal government’s online job bank with minimal assistance. Most clients have to rely on a social-service worker to help them conduct the mandatory online job searches. One of the social workers explained that preparing the clients for the work environment involves finding a job as well as developing “social skills, working with individuals, how to communicate with other people and being assisted to integrate into society” (Social-worker interview four, Riverview Centre, 2005).

As previously discussed, restructured labour laws now require mentally disabled people to join the work force by upgrading their skills. Before job training or work placement can begin, the social-service worker liaises with the social-service referring agency and often other social-service organizations. The primary objective for the service worker is to find and maintain employment for all 300 clients. The service workers monitor the employment activity of clients by telephoning employers to discuss job development. Once the worker secures employment for the client, the client is placed on a job trial, where they work as unpaid labour for a short period of time. If the client is deemed employable after this probationary period, they are then paid.

The social-service workers provide basic client training on how to look for employment on the federal government online job-data bank. The job futures and other employment websites are also accessed to review the job descriptions and the skills that are required. The problem with the advanced digital service is that it was designed for able-bodied and -minded, technology-literate individuals. Even with basic training, most of the Riverview Centre clients are not able to adapt to the digital self-service employment regime. Some clients are afraid of computers and do not want to conduct online job searches. When this occurs, a worker has to spend considerable time introducing the client to the technology slowly, on a step-by-step basis, to help overcome the fear.

For clients with cognitive difficulties, learning computer skills requires a systematic approach, requiring service workers to provide extensive, time-consum-
ing training. For the most part, the service worker searches the employment websites and also conducts the online job search on behalf of the client. Scholars who study the impact of information and communication technology on people with cognitive impairments indicate that responses to non-assisted technologies range from confusion to disorientation, which create overwhelming feelings of vulnerability. What follows is self-exclusion (Adkins, Smith, Barnett, & Grant, 2006; Dobransky & Hargittai, 2006).

The workers indicated that many of their clients are just not able to adapt to information technologies. With all the focus on technology, they are concerned a number of the clients will be left behind. A few clients have adequate or superior information communication technology skills. But when the computers crash or the online job website is slow, these clients become frustrated, heightening their general level of stress. As previously noted, there are not enough service workers to provide the special level of Internet and computer training required.

The service workers were divided over whether the clients would benefit from online training. Some were of the view that client online training was unrealistic. They emphasized the social importance of the services they deliver, including working with the clients, providing them with support, and building their self-esteem. Again, the workers have to provide client support to help them conduct an online job search, as well as answer client questions. As one worker put it, “[the] huge thing with working with clients is that you need to be with them. . . . I don’t think a computer screen can do that” (Staff interview four, Riverview Centre Field Report, 2005).

By contrast, other workers expressed concern that if their clients did not receive any online training, they would “stay at the bottom of the heap in terms of skills development” (Staff focus group discussion, Riverview Centre, 2005). They recognized that their clients require computer training in order to improve their employment prospects. However, the centre does not have the financial resources to upgrade its communication system and computers to provide clients with adequate information technology training.

Conclusion
This paper has argued that the Riverview Centre’s underfunded and inadequate technology system makes it very difficult for the social-service workers to interface with advanced government networks to report client employment-service information. It has shown that the Canadian provincial and federal governments reduced public-service costs by outsourcing the delivery of employment services to the centre. It has also shown that investments in highly developed government technology systems provide the metrics to assess the outputs of social-service workers. The digital Taylorization of social-service labour occurs through the simplification, routinization, and standardization of client-service reports to centralized control systems. It underscores the de-skilling of social-service work to such a degree that it seems as though their labour is shaped by the digital networks. The delivery of employment services also conceals the dual aspect of the commodification of the social workers’ labour through contract employment and technological means. The short-term labour provided by the mentally disabled clients has been re-commodified by workfare policies and by the compulsory use
of the government’s online employment system.

**Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank the Riverview Centre staff, social-service workers, and clients for taking part in the *Community Intermediaries in the Knowledge Society* study. I would also like to thank the two *CJC* reviewers for their erudite comments and Andrew Reddick for his invaluable comments.

A version of this paper was presented at the Political Economy Section of International Association of Media and Communication Researchers (IAMCR) conference in July 2007 in Paris as “The Degradation of Social Service Work in the Twenty-First Century” and as “The Digital Taylorisation of the Riverview Centre’s Social Service Workers” at the Qualitatives 2008 conference at the University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB, in May 2008.

**Notes**

1. To comply with University of New Brunswick and National Research Council ethics boards and ensure the anonymity of the workers and clients, the pseudonym “Riverview Centre” is used throughout the paper.

2. This case study is one of four from the *Community Intermediaries in the Knowledge Society* report (Rideout et al., 2006).

3. The survey obtained a 64% response rate from 150 questionnaires.

4. For-profit social services are also provided for some health care support on a contract basis (see Baines, 2004).

5. The provincial social-work community-college diploma is a two-year program.

6. Precarious employment is defined as temporary (time-limited and contractual) and part-time work. It is how government short-term, project, and targeted program funding is operationalized through community-service organizations.

**References**


