Article

Explaining the Data Double: Confessions and Self-Examinations in Job Recruitments

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Abstract

The practice of cybervetting—i.e., online background checks of a jobseeker's 'data double'—is considered to be a valuable tool in the recruitment process by an increasing amount of employers. As a consequence, jobseekers lose some control over what aspects of their past, personal interests or private life they will share with the employer. Moreover, jobseekers are expected to confess, explain and contextualize unfavorable information about them if they want to be perceived as employable. This study aims to show how cybervetting recruiters encourage and anticipate such confessions, and use the outcomes to evaluate jobseekers' honesty and capacity for self-reflection. The analysis is based on qualitative interviews with 36 Swedish human resource professionals, hiring managers and employers, and guided by Foucault's theoretical work on self-examinations, along with the confessional culture and its related concepts. We argue that confessions about information found on the internet are an important factor of what we label 'online employability': jobseekers' capability to sanitize, keep track of and explain their data doubles. Hence, as the recruiter can examine a jobseeker's private spheres, cybervetting is a surveillance practice with direct consequences on recruitment as well as clear effects on jobseekers' self-examinations and interactions with human resources personnel.

Introduction

Because of the commonly held assumption that jobseekers will withhold any information that may negatively affect their employment possibilities, a recruitment process usually involves the identification of additional references and information from sources other than the candidate (cf. Hedricks, Robie, and Oswald 2013). The digitalization of society, which causes us to leave behind digital traces, has favored employers, as they can now easily screen potential employees and survey current workers. One example of this development is 'cybervetting' (Berkelaar 2010), the practice of checking a jobseeker's 'data double', i.e., information about a person that can be found online.

An increasing number of employers consider cybervetting to be a valuable tool in the recruitment process. Employers' suspiciousness towards the authenticity of jobseekers' self-presentations is the primary motive for cybervetting, along with a need for more information than was provided by the jobseeker, as well as pure curiosity (Berkelaar 2010; Berkelaar and Buzzanell 2015; Kotamraju, Ben Allouch, and van Wingerden 2014). In the US, the fear of lawsuits and a need for sufficient due diligence constitute further justification for conducting online background checks. The eventual findings from these online searches

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provide information about a jobseeker's experience, competence, values, personality, etc., and will become part of the evaluation of whether the candidate is employable or not.

Cybervetting involves a major change in what information employers may access about a jobseeker when compared to what we define as 'traditional' recruitment practices, involving information vetting from offline sources. Traditionally, jobseekers have had a substantial amount of control over the information that employers receive about them. The jobseeker writes the application and provides contact information of former employers and/or other references. Some employers might seek other references than those provided by the jobseeker, but overall, the jobseeker is aware of what information the employer receives. In general, the provided information is produced with the sole purpose of attaining a job.

Cybervetting can be seen in the larger context of recruitment on the internet, involving for example companies strategically profiling themselves toward potential employees. Here, jobseekers and employees represent the judging eye, using sites as LinkedIn, SEEK or Glassdoor to rate and comment on employing organizations. This is an example of how surveillance on and through the internet today is characterized by a 'criss-crossing of the gaze' where no one is left out (Haggerty and Ericson 2000: 618) and everyone is involved, 'both as watched and as watchers' (Lyon 2007: 13). However, a comparison of the two phenomena—employers cybervetting job candidates and vice versa—reveals two key differences: the object of evaluations (the private person vs. the public company) and the type of information accessed (business related vs. personal/private).

In the case of cybervetting, employers will find various types of information about jobseekers: private as well as professional, authentic and ironic, old and up-to-date, posted by the jobseeker or by someone else, etc. People publish information online for a variety of reasons: professional (e.g., marketing themselves or their company), social (e.g., staying in touch with family and friends), therapeutic, educational, information sharing, among others. In this way, employers who cybervet may find private information about a jobseeker that is of no relevance for the individual's job performance, can constitute grounds for discrimination and/or involve various privacy problems, but which may nevertheless be difficult for the recruiter to disregard. Information searches online in general, and cybervetting in particular, is sometimes considered as acceptable since it is on par with how social control is executed in small communities. However, Trotter (2012: 19) argues that the kind of control that takes place on social media is 'a more enhanced form of surveillance when compared to the small town, as this information is retained indefinitely, rendered searchable and linked to a growing and volatile dwelling'. One consequence of the growing amount of searchable information online is the 'disappearance of disappearance', i.e., that it becomes more difficult to remain anonymous or let past events and information be forgotten (Haggerty and Ericson 2000: 619). Not only does this mean that the jobseeker has less control over what aspects of their past, personal interests or private life they will share with the employer, but it also entails expectations that the jobseeker will be able to explain and contextualize this information in a way that is acceptable to the employer.

The practice of cybervetting is thereby related to another aspect of modern life and the digitalized society: the confessional culture. Foucault argued that we live in a confessing society where the confession plays a part in various arenas of society and in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life. This notion of confessional culture is based upon Christian beliefs of penitence: 'at the heart of Christian penitence there is the confessional, and so the admission of guilt, the examination of conscience, and arising from that the production of a whole body of knowledge' (Foucault 1980b: 186). Since Foucault formulated this idea, we have seen the development of social media, reality TV, and anonymous online forums. In the 2000s, the development of internet platforms that facilitated user-generated content transformed internet users from consumers to creators of personal webpages, blogs, video-blogs, and social media postings (Cormode and Krishnamurthy 2008). These phenomena thus added another layer to the confessing society by offering both the possibility, as well as the urge, to confess in more or less public online settings. The confessional

culture affects job recruitment in at least two ways: 1) information disclosure made on social media may be discovered by potential employers who cybervet; and 2) employers may expect jobseekers to confess to online information as part of the recruitment process.

In this paper, we pay special attention to recruiters' expectations and evaluations of confessions regarding information that can be found online about candidates. Confessions and the related practice of self-examination have become important aspects of contemporary human resource management (HRM) (Townley 1994). Several studies have shown how employees in education and healthcare fields are trained in self-reflection and expected to apply it to be professional and self-governing (e.g., Fejes 2011; Cole 2006). Here, Foucault's notion of confession can be discerned in discussions on the need for professional self-reflection and life-long learning (Fejes and Dahlstedt 2013). In this paper we study what roles confessions play already in recruitment, the implications they have for job applicants and employers, and how these concepts can be understood in relation to online surveillance. This has been investigated through analyses of qualitative interviews with 36 Swedish employers, human resource professionals and hiring managers who employ cybervetting as part of their recruitment processes. We argue that jobseekers' ability to confess face to face with recruiters therefore is an important part of what we label 'online employability'.

Theory and previous research

Cybervetting as examination and surveillance

Lyon (2007: 14) defines surveillance as 'the focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction'. From this definition, Townley's (1994) argument that HRM practices (e.g., recruitment of new personnel) can be studied using Foucauldian perspectives of surveillance, discipline, and control is convincing. Townley presents HRM as the construction and production of knowledge. In order to control an object, i.e., an employee, and make it productive, the object needs to be known. This knowledge about the individual could be reached through the techniques of examination and confession. *Examination* makes it possible to classify each individual (or group) in relation to other individuals (or groups), and to treat, reward or reprimand the individual in accordance with the classification. In recruitment, examination is manifested through different forms of testing and assessments in order to determine if the candidate fits the job, but also through background checks, including cybervetting.

Cybervetting involves information gathering from the internet and may—in a job recruitment context— influence how candidates are classified. This is an illustrative example of how surveillance often is used as a means of 'social sorting'—i.e., to classify people, for example as employable or not—based on collection of personal information available through search engines and databases (cf. Lyon 2003; Trottier 2012). It is an easy, cheap and fast way to collect rich amounts of information on job applicants and is often conducted without the applicants' knowledge. According to Trottier (2012: 1-2), social media 'complicates relations' because of the social convergence, i.e., 'the increased social proximity of different life spheres', that takes place when fragments of our lives, taken from different life domains, are put together. Search engines similarly make it possible for others, such as employers, to bring together a vast array of information linked to a certain name. While we may strive to separate these different spheres of life by taking the time and effort to, for example, apply privacy settings to our social media profiles, we have little influence over the increased reach of articles about ourselves in the online newspaper, or of other's posts about us in online forums or on rating sites. Haggerty and Ericson (2000: 606) use the concept of 'surveillant assemblage' to capture the process of abstracting information about individuals from various contexts and reassembling it into 'data doubles'. In this article, we use the term *data double* to refer to the aggregated impression that recruiters construct from the results of their cybervetting, which is often taken as a true reflection of the job applicant.

In addition to negative aspects of surveillance and social control, cybervetting involves several potential privacy problems (Solove 2008). To begin with, there is the problem of *exclusion*, i.e., that individuals lack control over the content and how information about themselves is used. Moreover, cybervetting may cause reactions of humiliation if certain physical and emotional attributes about a person are exposed to others. This problem of *exposure* is similar to another privacy problem—*disclosure*—in that concealed, yet true, information is revealed to others. Disclosure, however, also involves the revelation of information that is typically used to judge people's character and may thus damage the jobseeker's reputation.

Confession and recruitment

Foucault describes how knowledge about individuals is not solely gained through examination, but also through the confession (Foucault 1988). These two methods respond to two different understandings of how to best reveal the 'truth':

The individual is both an object and a subject of power and knowledge; these two sides corresponding to two notions of 'truth' and methods for its discovery. As an object, the 'truth' about an individual is amenable to the conventional methods of positivistic social science. This is 'surface' knowledge, truth as it appears to others through observation, that is, empirical knowledge. As a subject, the 'truth' about an individual is hidden from view and must be accessed through other methods which delve deeper. (Townley 1993: 109)

In the confession, the individual is a producer of knowledge. The individual examines and constructs the 'self' by verbalizing her or his thoughts. Originally, in the western Christian tradition, the practice of confession was tied to renunciation, i.e., to forgo oneself and one's sins by confessing to a priest or a master. However, the rise of the social sciences caused the practice of confession to be 'reinserted in a different context' and serve to 'constitute, positively, a new self' (Foucault 1988: 49).

Confessions are then defined as 'all those procedures by which the subject is incited to produce a discourse of truth ... which is capable of having effects on the subject himself' (Foucault 1980a: 216). In interview situations, for example, candidates are asked to reveal the truth about themselves in a confession-like manner such as to acknowledge their main weaknesses (Townley 1993) and/or to account for their criminal records (Backman 2012). A confession can, therefore, be understood both as an evaluation of the individual's self-understanding and, thus, capacity for self-reflection, as well as a test of the individual's truthfulness.

Although Foucault points out that confessing, due to the confessional discourse, usually comes naturally to the subject, he stresses that a confession is always conducted within a power relationship where it is the listener who requires, prescribes and evaluates the confession, and decides whether or not the confessor has told the (whole) truth:

[T]he revelation of confession had to be coupled with the decipherment of what it said. The one who listened was not simply the forgiving master, the judge who condemned or acquitted; he was the master of truth. ... With regard to the confession, his power was not only to demand it before it was made, or decide what was to follow after it, but also to constitute a discourse of truth on the basis of its decipherment. (Foucault 1990: 66f.)

The recruitment process also includes a power relationship, as the recruiter decides whether or not to offer a confessing jobseeker a position, hence playing the listener role. It is also interesting to note that in this situation the call for confession reflects an unequal relationship as it is not expected that the recruiters will reveal secrets of their own, or of the organization.

Confessions as reflexive exploitation

Recent literature on confessions in work life has identified confessions to be part of the growing demand for self-reflective practitioners and even included in-house-training (Fejes 2011; Rolfe and Gardner 2006). As is shown in this paper, confessions are a way to test a jobseeker's capacity for self-reflection, a term that is generally used as a synonym for Foucault's notion of 'self-examinations'. Self-reflection is viewed by some as a desirable and good practice that helps foster responsible and empowered employees (Rolfe and Gardner 2006), but by others as a practice that risks turning into 'the subtle but pervasive exercise of power that operates to maintain a level of surveillance upon the activity of professionals' (Gilbert 2001: 200). Cremin (2010: 7) argues that a more correct term for self-reflection would be 'reflexive exploitation' because the jobseeker 'reflects on herself as an object of exchange in order to access a wage and social status'. In contrast to those who see self-reflection as empowering, Cremin (2003), inspired by Marxist theory, claims that it is a manifestation of powerlessness. Hence, when reflexivity is transformed into an issue about the individual's ability to adapt to organizational norms, then the power inequality between employer and employee is concealed. The jobseekers will not see their role in this power conflict but will instead struggle with how to regulate themselves in line with the internalized expectations of the organization.

Townley (1994) argues that modern HR management is often based on a governmentality approach where the organization is governed through the self-government of its employees. As self-reflection constitutes an aspect of self-government, hiring employees with good self-reflection skills will translate into the promise of an organization that will continue to have employees that are able to progress and improve in the future (cf. Fejes and Dahlstedt 2013). In line with Garsten and Jacobsson's (2004: 8) notion of 'employability' as 'the capacity of individuals to adapt to the demands of employment', it seems reasonable to claim that self-reflection—as expressed through confession—can be thought of as an indicator of jobseeker employability.

Proactive disclosure and the transparency imperative

Internet searches serve as both examination and grounds for confession, and thus concern the relationship between jobseekers and their data doubles, i.e., the traces of themselves that can be found online (Haggerty and Ericson 2000). As we will discuss later, recruiters tend to view applicants' data-doubles as keys to who they really are. Moreover, recruiters expect, to varying degrees, that the candidate will be truthful about information that the recruiter could discover.

When recruiters find something online that can be interpreted as negative for the candidate, e.g., photos or texts implying bad judgment, 'odd' or addictive behaviors, and/or involvement in conflicts or scandals, they often make a note of this as a 'red flag' (cf. Berkelaar, Scacco, and Birdsell 2015). Such information can be excused, tolerated or disqualified, but is rarely neglected. Berkelaar (2010: 220) showed in her study that '[f]inding missing or contradictory information might not necessarily lead to disqualification, but ... at least suggested the need for a conversation and initiated attempts to make sense of the discordant or missing components of applicants' career capital'. Berkelaar et al. (2015: 12) also stress that the negative evaluation of a candidate is not based so much on the unfavorable information in itself as on the way that it is revealed, for example, if it is an unwelcomed surprise or a deception. One of the employers they interviewed stated: 'If a candidate was upfront about any issues, I would not have any issues'. Other studies have corroborated these results, showing that partial confessions, or confessions of a relatively less serious offence, are perceived as more reliable than a non-confession, yet less culpable than a full confession (Peer, Acquisti, and Shalvi 2014; Sternglanz 2009).

In another article, Berkelaar (2014) describes *the new transparency imperative*, stating that previous expectations of *reactive disclosure* have now changed into expectations of *proactive disclosure*. This transformation has increased the expectations for organizational information to be made generally available and accessible to the public, not merely disclosed in response to certain events or accusations.

Berkelaar (2014: 19) shows how this imperative is extended to individual workers and online contexts where ‘people with more digital transparency were considered more ethical and employable’. In this article, we show how the new transparency imperative of organizations, and a confessional culture in general, leads to expectations that jobseekers will confess aspects of their data doubles that stand in contrast with the employers’ expectations of their online profiles.

Materials and Methods

The qualitative analyses presented in this article are based on material from interviews and observations of 36 Swedish HR professionals, hiring managers and employers (hereafter referred to as ‘recruiters’) conducted during 30 separate occasions between 2013–2015. The participants in the study had initially either attended a presentation about the research project or participated in an online survey, which we had distributed to the email lists of various HR-groups and alumni, or directed to employers who had advertised job openings on the Swedish Employment Office website. Participants were encouraged to leave their contact information for further participation in the study at the end of the survey or presentations. Thus, the sample constitutes, to a large extent, a self-selection in which all the participants have shown a personal interest in the topic. This interest may be related to previous reflections about the use of cybervetting and its implications.

We chose to proceed with only respondents who had left their contact details and had used online searches at least once during their recruitment processes. The participants represent a wide range of large and medium-sized organizations, covering public organizations—including companies run by the state and municipalities—and private organizations from sectors such as IT; staffing and recruitment; transport and logistics; restaurant; telemarketing; manufacturing; and fast moving consumer goods.

The semi-structured interviews contained questions about the recruiter’s cybervetting practices, their motives for using this method, and their accounts and reflections regarding various ethical and methodological concerns. The interviews were primarily conducted individually or in groups with two or three participants as face-to-face interviews. Individual interviews were also conducted by phone or by Skype. In most cases, the interviews were conducted at the interviewees’ work places. The interviews—which lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours—were all recorded and later transcribed in detail.

The analyses presented in this study are based upon the results from previous analyses, which identified confessions as a reoccurring theme throughout the interviews. These initial analyses employed the methodological approach of constructivist grounded theory, beginning with an initial line-by-line coding of the transcripts followed by a comparison of data chunks within the codes (Charmaz 2014). The analyses presented in this study constitute the latter steps of this methodological approach, as they involve the focused coding (re-reading) of the data based on codes that were found to be especially interesting, i.e., codes concerning the call for, and interpretation of, confessions.

Encouraging and evaluating confessions

In line with confessional culture and the new transparency imperative, recruiters encourage and set the stage for jobseeker confessions in various ways to complement the evaluation of a jobseeker’s online employability. Berkelaar (2014) mentions the proactive and reactive disclosure of information. In this analysis, these concepts are used, respectively, as *proactive confessions* taking place prior to cybervetting, or the disclosure of results, and as *reactive confessions* in response to recruiter’s talk of online findings.

The recruiters in our study use both *explicit and implicit confrontations* to encourage reactive confessions and to follow-up on negative and/or disturbing search results. In explicit confrontations, the recruiters do not try to conceal that they have been cybervetting, or what they have found. Instead, they explicitly refer to these findings and expect the candidate to either disqualify the authenticity, validate the relevance of the

information, or verify and explain the findings. A direct confrontation makes it possible to ‘cut to the chase’, and pose straightforward questions to the candidate.

Insecurity about the reliability and validity of the information found through cybervetting offers one explanation for why recruiters sometimes decide to formulate their follow-up questions in a more indirect manner rather than as an explicit confrontation.¹ In implicit confrontations recruiters try to steer the conversation in a way that makes it easier for the jobseekers to raise the specific topic themselves and voluntarily confess to the ‘truth’ that has already been revealed through the online searches. It is perceived as ‘fair’ towards the candidate when they have a chance to confess, and this can also help the recruiter see past their prejudiced interpretations of the information. Thereby, the recruiter will have a more informative and accurate basis for their evaluation of the information and candidate. As the candidate does not know (for sure) that the recruiter already holds this information, implicit confrontations can also be used to set the stage for the illusion of a proactive disclosure by jobseekers.

Confrontations can thus be used both to assess jobseeker’s inclination to tell the truth (i.e., to confess to that which could be found online), and/or to verify and nuance online information that is not automatically assumed to be true. The outcome of the confrontation can then be interpreted as a test of the jobseeker’s honesty and transparency, as well as her or his capacity for self-reflection and personal development. The following sections will further investigate these aspects.

Expectations of proactive confessions

Proactive disclosure is implicitly encouraged by recruiters, for example, when the recruiter asks if there is anything else that the jobseeker would like to tell them. Recruiters sometimes tell candidates that it is better to take the initiative to reveal unflattering information rather than have it be unveiled later on. By anticipating the cybervetting result and disclosing all of the information by their own initiative, jobseekers will have the opportunity to explain the findings instead of being rejected without such a possibility. This type of action also demonstrates that the jobseeker understands that their online information is relevant for employers and that it can be interpreted negatively, affecting their chances of receiving the job. Most importantly, proactive confessions show that the jobseeker is honest and transparent about any job-relevant information.

The quote below is an example of how recruiters desire proactive confessions. The recruiter, who works at a headhunting firm, highlights that candidates need to know their data double (in this case, old news articles that reflect badly on the jobseeker and are accessible online) *and* need to take charge in disclosing information before the recruiter conducts the search:

Recruitment consultant: In non-profit organizations, or political, or the business sector, it comes down to what the media says. If you had any publicity in the media, it sticks. And then you need, as a person, you need to be aware of that and maybe be proactive in a discussion, in an interview, to [say] ‘if you google me you’ll find this, but there’s a story to it’. (IP02)

¹ Additional reasons for a more discreet approach can be noticed in the recruiters’ general talk about transparency in the recruitment process and various ways to keep the cybervetting practice covert, e.g., they do not want to worry the candidates, the perception is that it is already ‘obvious’ to everyone that employers cybervet jobseekers, or that it is not considered fully legitimate. Using Solove’s (2008) taxonomy of privacy violations, the legitimacy problems then stem from a risk of disclosing or exposing clearly private information.

Here, we can also note that jobseekers are expected to be able to contextualize the information and provide an explanation. This ability is also relevant to evaluations of a candidate's capacity for self-reflection, which we will return to.

Encouraging candidates to confess proactively could be interpreted in a way that a confession will not negatively affect the jobseeker's chances of securing a job. The proactive confession might even be framed as their only chance to be considered, as in the next quotation:

Hiring-manager: It's ok that you've had a conflict with your previous employer. Maybe it was the employer who was barking mad? But I like to know why. And during the interview you [as a recruiter] can be upfront and say: 'if there's anything, I like you to tell me now'. While with internet searches there's no chance to [small laughter] explain or defend [yourself]. ... And I try to say that: 'it's ok. What's not ok is if I find something out later. So if you tell me now, I'll hear your version and then I can call your employers and I'll hear what they have to say'. (IP18)

The quote above was taken from a section of an interview where the recruiter, who works at an HR division in a municipality, talks about the downsides of internet searches. He says the main problem is that you cannot be sure that you have interpreted the information correctly, and for this reason he prefers to receive the information from the jobseeker beforehand. However, he adds that 'it is not ok' if negative information appears later in the recruitment process from someone other than the candidate. Thus, jobseekers need to take the initiative to be transparent from the beginning. This can be understood in relation to Berkelaar's (2014) finding that recruiters interpret online transparency as an indication that a person is ethical and employable. Recruiters' wishes for proactive confessions by jobseekers in an offline context, along with transparency, similarly reflect how the recruiter is looking for evidence that the candidate has good ethical values and is thus employable.

Expectations of reactive confessions

In comparison to proactive confessions, which are the spontaneous result of a jobseeker acting upon an internalized confessional culture and/or implicit encouragement by recruiters, reactive confessions cannot be considered as voluntary confessions. Reactive confessions are, more or less, forced by confrontations between jobseekers and recruiters. These confrontations can be either explicit or implicit, or used in combination by recruiters to reveal certain information about a jobseeker.

Explicit confrontations

During explicit confrontations, recruiters use the information they have gathered online to confront the candidate, for example, if the jobseeker has misrepresented their previous job experience, as shown in the next quote. Here, the confrontation concerns the misrepresentation (i.e., dishonesty) as such rather than disclosure about the jobseeker's past. This corroborates previous research, which has demonstrated that lies and dishonesty are perceived to be more incriminating than most negative information of a different nature (Wood, Schmidtke, and Decker 2007; Berkelaar, Scacco, and Birdsell 2015). Some recruiters express an understanding for a person's wish to keep negative aspects of their past secret during initial contact with a potential employer. Even though this position is perceived as understandable, it is not tolerated in later stages of the recruitment process. When confronted, the candidate is still expected to be open and honest about their past:

Partner: Often I have [the search results] in mind. The interview, [when] I'm in it, in the first meeting, and can ask these questions, then-

Interviewer: Do you refer to it explicitly then? Do you say like 'I saw on LinkedIn', or-

Partner: It can be like that. Sometimes. That's case based: 'Well, I saw that you're on LinkedIn, that you were part of this project. You present it like it was really successful,

but I know that it was a loss of 3 million [Swedish kronor]. How come?’ So then you get an answer for that. (IP32)

This quote illustrates the suspiciousness that is raised when information from online and offline (application documents or the recruiter’s prior knowledge) sources differ. Here, the jobseekers are often given the opportunity to help establish which version represents the truth. In this quote, the recruiter already knew the ‘truth’. Still, he needed the confession to position the candidate as trustworthy and self-reflexive. This finding, as well as the quote, could also be interpreted in relation to the findings of Peer and his colleagues (2014) that a confession of a less serious offence is perceived to be more reliable than a non-confession. That is, if the jobseeker in the quotation above had adhered to the first version of the story without providing any confession, then this would have made it difficult for the recruiter to trust the candidate.

Hence, transparency is sometimes perceived to be more important than being flawless and is considered an important part of the recruitment process. In the following quote, one of the owners of a firm that provides legal counseling discusses a situation when he and his partner became suspicious of the truthfulness and openness of a jobseeker. The interviewee stressed that he only uses LinkedIn to examine jobseekers, since he believes that other sources are non-reliable or irrelevant. He describes how he and his partner, despite their suspicions, still believed that the person might be right for the job and therefore decided to confront the candidate and set the stage for a confession:

Partner: And we assume that the person is totally straight with us, right. Like someone we recruited just recently, we felt that something wasn’t 100% right, but we we’re interested in the person, right. So we called him in and said that we’re interested, we’d like to talk, but ‘we’re going to have a talk amongst us boys’, right. And we said ‘this and this we don’t get, explain!’

Interviewer: Mhm. And what was that about then?

Partner: Well it turned out that he had a personal bankruptcy and a tax debt that he couldn’t quite handle, and so on. Which we’re specialized at fixing, right? But he had the right attitude, the right competence, so we said ‘ok, it’s natural that you don’t want to expose your dark side during the first encounter’. And so we had a long talk, and sat and talked for two hours, right. And then we said ‘we’re interested, I want you to go home and think properly about if you’re interested. These are the ground rules, and if you think it’s ok—’ Like, ‘ok’ for us means that you’re transparent. ... So once we find these people that are interesting to us, given our requirement profile, and our feeling, and—. Then, the next step in the process is sort of to make sure that all the skeletons in the closet are revealed. (IP35)

The recruiter expresses himself in a rather informal and grounded way in the quotation above, speaking in a way that makes the recruiter and candidate feel as equals, i.e., ‘have a talk amongst us boys’.² This approach lays the foundations for a forgiving, and maybe even intimate and familiar, organizational culture where it is acceptable to make mistakes as long as you are prepared to play by ‘the rules’ and be transparent about your weaknesses and/or wrongdoings. We would claim, however, that when it comes to the recruitment process, the reciprocal openness and honesty shown in the quote merely reflects a moral discourse about equality. In reality, the jobseeker’s confession takes places in a clearly asymmetrical power relationship in which the recruiter will never reveal as much of his or her own past and secrets.

² Having ‘a talk amongst us boys’ evidently also involves a gendered dimension, which could be interpreted into the tone of familiarity and equality among men, i.e., producing male homosociality.

Transparency is then, in some cases, more important than perfection (cf. Berkelaar 2014) in reactive confessions, and the ability to tell the truth when requested to seems to play a crucial role. This is in contrast with proactive confessions, in which the ability to confess without being confronted with the truth is paramount.

Implicit confrontations

Recruiters can also employ implicit questions to set the stage for reactive confessions. In the following example from an interview with three recruiters working at a company in the entertainment business, the recruiters had found photos and documentation from a jobseeker's second career as an artist, dealing with topics that the recruiters found very provocative. In this case, the candidate pulled back the job application before the interview. When asked how they would otherwise have dealt with the situation, the recruiters claimed they would have used implicit confrontation to test the candidate's ability to be honest and transparent:

Interviewer: But what would you've said during the interview, what would you've prepared for?

Recruiter 1: No, I guess I had gone for a regular interview, and then ask a bit about her interests. And then you can always like: 'mhm...?'

Recruiter 2: See if she says something...

Interviewer: (small laughter). But would you have said: 'we've found...?'

Recruiter 1: No, I wouldn't have done that. (IP07-09)

It is important to note that the recruiters' choice not to reveal their information about the candidate's artistic work is not problematized. In this situation the recruiters are equally dishonest, yet they do not consider their secrecy to be relevant to the formation of trust between employer and potential employee. Even when recruiters uphold an idea of reciprocal trust and transparency, the employer-employee power relationship still has clearly asymmetrical dynamics (cf. Cremin 2010).

Confessions as a mean to evaluate self-reflection

It is not always enough that jobseekers merely disclose past or present events and actions that can be found online. Recruiters may also want to witness a confession that not only demonstrates the candidate's honesty and transparency, but also shows capacity for self-reflection and personal development. For a candidate to convince a recruiter that certain information is no longer valid, they must not only be able to disqualify the information as irrelevant, but also show that they are now a more mature person with the 'right' values. The candidate needs to show both self-reflection as well as personal development in relation to negative findings.

In an interview with two recruiters from a municipality's HR division, the interviewees talked about a candidate whom they—through online recordings—had found to be associated with racist attitudes that would be incompatible with a job in the municipality. However, the way the jobseeker talked about these activities during the interview, combined with his later engagements, convinced the recruiters that the candidate now held an opposite standpoint:

HR specialist: We definitely brought it up during the interview, so to speak. That, well, how does this person relate to what he propagated before? And his answer, but also his later merits, showed clearly that this was nothing that he supported. He had since moved in the totally opposite direction. (IP05)

This quotation shows that a story about an individual's past, albeit a negative one, might work in the jobseeker's favor if it indicates a capacity for personal development and self-regulation.

The interest in these confessions, as well as the associated self-reflections, can sometimes be so great that recruiters may choose to follow-up on information that they do not really perceive as being problematic in itself. For example, one recruiter chose to ask a female candidate about the motives behind her posing for a men's magazine several years earlier, even though he claimed that he had no problems with the act itself. In this way, certain discovered information, regardless of its relevance, can become an opportunity to test the jobseeker's ability to self-reflect, be self-critical, and to use the experience for personal growth and development.

However, not all jobseekers manage to display the desired capacity for self-reflection. Candidates may fail the test of self-awareness and self-criticism posed by the confrontation, and will then be considered unemployable. The following excerpt is an example of this. The recruiter, who works at a municipality, talks about how a jobseeker failed to recognize that online information regarding her private life was of interest to the recruiter and that it could affect her possibilities to work for the municipality. It became clear during the interview that he found the jobseeker's private life to be of relevance due to an enhanced risk of some sort of criminal activity, such as blackmailing:

Hiring manager: In one case, I discovered that the person had quite close contacts with people who had a criminal background.

Interviewer: Mhm. Organized [crime], or certain individuals that you know of?

Hiring manager: Well, yes, they belong to this network that is well known in [the city] [small laughter].

Interviewer: Yes.

Hiring manager: Of course, it caused me to have a conversation with the person in question. And we didn't continue with her then.

Interviewer: How did this person respond to [the confrontation], that caused you to not-[speaking simultaneously, inaudible]?

Hiring manager: No, she couldn't quite understand the problem. (Interviewer: yes, ok.) That was probably what caused it. Yes. That she didn't understand—. Like, she was 23 or something, as usual [laughter], and sort of believed that her private life was something separate from her future professional life. And I like to claim that it's not that easy, at least in the beginning of one's career, to make such a clear-cut separation. Given that we process—, that what we do is classified, and so on. So my trust in her didn't increase after that conversation. (IP20)

In the case of most other organizations, a candidate with criminal contacts would probably not have even been invited for an interview. In this case, the recruitment was for a position at an organization with a high turnover of personnel. As this recruiter is constantly hiring, he wanted to give the jobseeker a chance, both because it seemed to be the right thing to do and because he hoped that she would be able to account for this connection in a way that presented her as employable. The important lesson of this extract is therefore not the finding that the jobseeker had connections with known criminals. Instead, her inability to be self-reflective in the desired way was what caused the recruiter to reject her; she did not show awareness that the contacts in question were inappropriate and was not willing to adapt her private life to her professional life. Another interesting aspect is that the recruiter frames the jobseeker's wish to separate her private life from her professional life as naïve and immature, explaining that such a distinction is impossible to uphold in their type of work.

In the case discussed above, confessions function as a means to evaluate a jobseeker's capacity for self-reflection. Confessions can serve this purpose even if the search results do not raise any concerns or are considered to be irrelevant, because a jobseeker's actions tend to be more important than the content. The evaluation of a jobseeker's ability for self-reflection and self-development based on cybervetting results demands that jobseekers are willing to discuss their past and/or private lives with the recruiter, which

leaves little room for jobseekers' own opinions regarding the relevance of search results in the recruitment and further blurs the line between work and private life.

Passing the test: Transparency, honesty and self-reflection

In this paper, we have shown that the confessions of jobseekers have an important role in recruitment processes that employ cybervetting, that confessions are staged or anticipated by the recruiters and used to evaluate jobseeker's honesty, transparency and capacity for self-reflection. Moreover, we have shown that although a 'flawed' data double does not necessarily mean that candidates are rejected, it needs to be compensated for by a trustworthy confession. Here, we introduce the concept of *online employability* to stress how jobseekers' capacity to sanitize, keep track of, and explain their data double has become part of individual employability.

Jobseekers are either expected to disclose information that can be found online in a proactive manner or to confess reactively when confronted with the findings. We have shown how recruiters set the stage for such confessions by either encouraging confessions in general or by using implicit or explicit confrontations to ask candidates about information found online. Thus, various forms of confessional practices stem from the online surveillance performed by recruiting personnel, and these have become a way for jobseekers to build trust during the recruitment process so that they can be considered employable. Even if both parties adapt the practice of online information searches, it is the unequal power relation between employers and jobseekers that allows for this staging of confessions and legitimizes the confrontations.

Proactive confessions, during which jobseekers are invited to 'produce a discourse of truth' (Foucault 1980a: 216), occur prior to cybervetting. Recruiters who expect proactive disclosure view such confessions as an indication that the jobseeker is honest and transparent, and that the jobseeker shares the recruiter's view that online information is relevant to the open position. When jobseekers lack the will or courage to confess proactively, if they wait to see what the recruiters find out, or if they do not understand that certain information in their data doubles can be perceived as problematic, then their actions can have negative consequences for their employment chances. Some employers perceive the withholding of certain information to be reasonable and acceptable, as long as the jobseeker still confesses when confronted with the findings. Sometimes, jobseekers are even given a second chance to confess. On other occasions, however, recruiters will consider the jobseekers' data doubles to be the truth and, consequently, the recruiters will consider it unnecessary to receive the jobseeker's explanation of the found information. Even though recruiters may wish for jobseekers to display full transparency through voluntary confessions, reactive disclosure—in response to confrontations—appears to be sufficient in some cases. This could be understood in relation to recruiters' primary interest in the 'truth' about a jobseeker, and how this can be used to predict the future behavior of the candidate as an employee. The confession is, in these cases, not significant in itself—i.e., as an indication of the candidate's honesty and transparency—but rather a way to assess that truth.

Previous studies on cybervetting have found similar conclusions, showing that employers expect jobseekers to sanitize their data doubles, be transparent, and proactively disclose information that can be found online (Berkelaar 2014; Berkelaar, Scacco, and Birdsell 2015). However, our study shows that non-sanitized data doubles can be accepted as long as the jobseeker can account for negative findings through a self-reflective confession. Thus, confessions can also be used to evaluate a jobseeker's capacity for self-reflection and self-development. Several studies have shown how employees in the areas of education and healthcare are trained in self-reflection and are expected to use these skills to be professional and self-governing (Fejes 2011; Cole 2006). Our paper shows that the capacity for self-examination and confession is a vital part also of the recruitment process; it contributes to a candidate's evaluation as employable and is valued in many sectors of the labor market other than education and healthcare. Moreover, recruiters' expectations of confessions require that jobseekers agree with the relevance of private and past

information in the recruitment process. Thus, the confessional culture can be perceived as having expanded to new confessional practices through, for example, its intersection with other self-governing practices. As a result, the inner demand of a jobseeker to confess to the recruiter the insight they have gained through self-examination has become integrated into the discourse on individual employability. In the context of recruitment, individuals' capacity to explain or sanitize their data doubles can be described as online employability.

Jobseekers who fail to confess in the expected way, or do not display the desirable degree of self-reflection, will most likely be dropped from the recruitment process. Moreover, there is little room for jobseekers to have a different opinion on where the line between work and private life should be drawn. Jobseekers who choose not to disclose private information to the employer may still be surveilled and confronted about such information. The transparency and the confessions of the jobseekers should not be regarded as voluntary. However, there are also recruiters who do not expect jobseekers to provide a proactive confession. Thus, not all the discovered information seems to fall under 'the transparency imperative', but only the information that the recruiter deems to be significant. Moreover, the *kind* of transparency and self-reflection that the jobseeker should display, and when, is defined by the recruiter, a dynamic that upholds the asymmetrical power relation between employer and employee (cf. Foucault 1980a). At least in the Swedish case, the expectations and consequences of cybervetting and disclosure seem to be more complex than findings from previous US studies indicate (cf. Berkelaar 2014; Berkelaar, Scacco, and Birdsell 2015).

The presented study has some methodological limitations. First, the study was conducted using mainly mid-range and large organizations from the Swedish labor market, while small businesses are sparsely represented in our sample. Conceivably, different organizations may have different policies and attitudes towards the use of cybervetting (cf. Chang and Madera 2012) and future studies should focus on the use and impact of cybervetting in small companies. Furthermore, the Swedish population has a high degree of computer skills, its internet use is among the most widespread in the world, and a majority reports being active on social media (Findahl 2014). Further studies should therefore be carried out in countries with both high and low levels of internet and social media use in order to determine whether internet and social media use affects how employers view and handle cybervetting search results.

Our study also calls for a renewed discussion among unions and policy makers about the ongoing blurring of the line between work and private life, the surveillance practices of HR personnel, and the establishment of certain guidelines that specify to what extent personal and/or invalid information found online can be used in hiring decisions. The new 'right to be forgotten' in the European General data protection regulation (Council Regulation 2016/679) highlights the need for discussions regarding the extent to which the ever-growing 'library' of personal information should be used by recruiters and what are the acceptable consequences for employers and jobseekers. The use of confession in recruitment provides jobseekers with a 'second chance' to present themselves as trustworthy and employable. As Foucault (1990) argues, it is however the listener—the recruiter—who evaluates the confession and whether it represents the (whole) truth. To produce a convincing discourse of truth, the confession should generally repeat and build upon narratives and discourses known to the recruiter. This means that the production and evaluation of confessions in recruitment also reproduce ideas of normality, something that should be explored further in future studies.

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