

The Picket Line in the Digital Age

Date : March 1, 2018



In the digital age, work is no longer a place that you go, but a thing that you do. The majority of academics, the majority of Londoners, and an increasing percentage of humanity wake up not to go to work, but wake up to find work lying next to them – on laptops, on tablet computers, on smartphones and on smartwatches. Work now sits next to you on the bus or the tube, it joins you at the dinner table, it comes with you on holiday. Work has left the building and become distributed across physical and digital space. The picket line however has remained, as you will have seen, very much fixed.

For those that may not be familiar with it, denying entrance to a building as a form of protest has a

long and inspiring history.

In the 5th century BCE, there was the first production of Aristophanes' comedy "Lysistrata", in which the women of Athens, tired of the Peloponnesian war, decide to try to end it by withdrawing from all sexual activity with men. The older women of the city, in sympathy with the younger women's campaign, blocked the entrance of the Acropolis, then housing the Athenian state treasury, denying access to the men of the city, and in turn cutting off the funds for the war. The result in the play is a war between the sexes in addition to the one between Athens and Sparta, but in the end, peace triumphs in both.

Jumping ahead a bit, in fact more than a bit, in December of 1982, 30,000 women from across the UK, including a good friend of mine, formed a human chain surrounding the 10km perimeter of Greenham Common Airforce Base, then housing American cruise missiles, creating a wall of bodies, and preventing people entering or leaving the site. The Greenham Common Camps lasted for several years, repeatedly and strategically blocking entrances to the base.

The most famous British example of a true picket line though, that being workers blocking their own workplace, has to be those used during the Miners Strikes of 1984-85, arguably the most bitter and hard-fought industrial action in British history. Fighting against the closure of mining pits by the conservative Thatcher government, miners up and down the country, at one point numbering over 140,000, refused to work. In order to keep solidarity, and prevent mine operation, picket lines were drawn, preventing picket-line breakers, known as 'scabs' from entering. Despite suffering through in some cases months of lost wages, meaning going hungry and often going into great debt, the picket lines were a strong source of the notion that everyone should suffer together to beat the establishment – one for all and all for one.

The aim of the blockade in each of these cases was to attempt to separate the worker from the means of their production, forming a physical barrier preventing employees from reaching, in these cases – gold in the Acropolis, weapons of war in the RAF base, and machinery in the mines. Blocking access to space made sense because blocking access to space meant blocking access to work.

If we apply this rationale to the situation we currently find ourselves in, what do we find? Well, if we take the main tasks of the striking academics to be high quality teaching and innovative research, where is the means of production? For teaching, if we consider the output of labour to be enlightened students, the subject of labour has to be, well, not-quite-yet-enlightened students, that being us. And rather than the picket line being used to separate academics from us, we have been invited outside of the building to join them and continue certain activities in other locations. Is this not the worker leaving the factory, but taking his or her machinery with them?

Turning to the task of top-quality research, it seems obvious again that academia does not, in the same way as other industries, produce widgets – it produces, reproduces, and disseminates

knowledge - it creates ideas and information. And this actually applies to the vast majority of workers across this city. We no longer create things, we are knowledge workers. The working class has become the clerking class. And this information is not formed through heavy machinery in this building, it is formed in minds, and on mobile technologies. Have the workers left these instruments of their labour, their phones and laptops, in this building, on the other side of the picket line? I would guess the answer is no. And I would further guess that the majority of these devices have not remained closed or turned off during striking hours.

Whilst the principle behind the physical picket line remains an honourable one, I suggest that with the advent of mobile and virtual technologies it is increasingly being rendered unfit for purpose.

Last week, during official UCU strike days, an anthropology research group that I will not name continued to publish their latest research via social media. To my knowledge, the websites and blogs of all academics remained online and accessible to the public. Entire e-books from a number of faculty remained available via UCL Press to be accessed for free across the world, by anyone at any time, and video content from a range of lecturers remained public on YouTube, Vimeo and a variety of Massive Open Online Courses. An email was even sent out encouraging Research and Reading Groups, made up of a range of staff and research students, to continue throughout the strike, that they were not 'conceived as part of the department's work' and they could be held 'in a pub, a student hall of residence, a living room, or under a tree in Gordon Square'.

I suggest that the logic behind allowing all these activities to continue, whilst creating a culture of anxiety and 'scabbing' around stepping across the threshold of this building is flawed. It is now seen as more moral to produce work outside of the building than to actively strike within it. It seems to me that we are not striking from work, but from the physical bricks and mortar of this department. To quote a student who may or may not be in this room 'we are striking, but we have not stopped working'. To quote a professor who may or may not be stood outside 'I doubt any staff member will actually stop working altogether. We are on strike, but we are not striking from doing work'.

By holding a physical, and only a physical picket line, and allowing activities to continue off-site, we are not striking from work, we are striking from space. And what this fails to take into account is that whilst academic pensions are under attack, space is very much under attack also.

I would wager that most students in this room, like me, live in what might truthfully be advertised as an 'expensive shithole' in a city with an estimated 20,000 empty residences. As an undergrad, I could not afford to live in the only halls of residence offered to me and had to live elsewhere. I don't know when this room last had a coat of paint or a new carpet, but I don't think it would take many alterations for it to be used convincingly as a location for a TV show set in the 1980's. And we are actually one of the most fortunate departments. Regularly students are attending UCL classes in other universities, in the meeting rooms of local hotels, and a fond memory of my Masters course is having to sit on a table for the first lecture of a module on none other than 'risk, power and uncertainty'.

By continuing activities outside of the university buildings, do we not run the risk of saying to the administrators of the university 'no matter, don't worry about the lack of investment in facilities, we can carry on just fine without these buildings anyway'. In addition, I think there may even be an argument that the physical picket line is in fact counterproductive to the strike itself, acting, much like thoughts and prayers after a terrorist incident, or a frame on a Facebook profile picture after some natural disaster, as a portal through which to absolve guilt and feel you are offering support, whilst in reality contributing little. The picket line creates a symbol that allows workers who, using mobile technologies, can work hard all day from a home or café, benefitting their employer whilst keeping their conscience clear, having not broken the physical picket.

The purpose of a picket though, is not simply to prevent the normal continuation of work, it is also to create publicity, and for this I think those stood outside today still deserve merit. A group of people stood together with placards and grumpy faces is photogenic in a way that, say, withholding taxes is not. And in a world obsessed with image that is an important point. But I ask, are we not also photogenic here right now, gathering together inside this building to debate, and engage, and participate?

If new, digital technologies are disrupting traditional methods of protest, in which ways are they creating new ones? We are all familiar with the use of social media to both organise and publicise physical protests, and have all witnessed viral online attacks attempting to remove power from both individuals and organisations. Early last month, unionised workers of the news organisation Vox all signed out of Slack, the company's internal messaging system, on mass, disrupting productivity, if only for an hour. On November 10th of last year, as part of Equal Pay Day, female employees of companies across the world switched on the 'out of office' on their emails, leaving every customer, client and colleague with a note that due to discrimination they were really not being paid for the rest of the year.

The most novel use though of the digital to protest has to go to Italian employees of the tech firm IBM back in 2007. Prior to the strike IBM had decided to invest a significant sum on a headquarters in the virtual world Second Life, to be used not only as advertisement for the company, but to actually host internal company meetings between executives stationed across the world. When the strike occurred then, workers protested in both physical and digital space, with over 1800 protesting avatars storming the company's virtual business centre. Teleporting in and out of virtual meetings, taking the form of geometric shapes, placards with legs, and a range of 'sentient' fruit, the workers succeeded in disrupting the work of their bosses who were located on the other side of the physical world.

So then, these are all nice ideas but I was trying to think of what I could do, practically, if I was a striking academic, to create what might be considered a digital extension of what is occurring outside. Or indeed, what I might well do in some similar future scenario. And ironically enough, I was inspired by the Provost himself, the very person we are striking towards to encourage to negotiate with the union.

I don't know how many of you remember the infamous Bellogate incident of 2014, but for those newer to UCL, we nearly had a Bellogate 2.0 earlier this academic year. Essentially what happened was an email was sent out from the address provost@ucl.ac.uk containing, inexplicably, one word – bello (B-E-L-L-O), in lower case, to all 26000 students at UCL. To compound the problem, the email list the provost used was left open, meaning that anybody that clicked reply all would then send another email to all 26000 students.

Before long, students being students, the email list all-students@ucl.ac.uk had been used to sign up to such things as the UK Independence Party, the dating site OKCupid, Pornhub, YouPorn, and the fan clubs of the band Coldplay and former vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin.

Over a period of hours, the email string reached a length of 3136 messages, sent to over 26000 members of the university, collectively numbering over 81.5 million individual email transactions. What became known as Bellogate was covered in all London and National newspapers, and became the number one trending hashtag on UK Twitter. As a student, I had no choice but to switch off my university email for the period of the digital onslaught, and this indeed became the official university advice. Whether you were working at the university, in a café, on public transport, or in bed, you were affected indiscriminately, with Bellogate not preventing work entirely, but reducing productivity, and going some way to separating me from the means of my production.

I suggest then that if we go back to the two goals of a picket being (1) to create publicity, and (2) to prevent the normal continuation of work, then Provost Michael Arthur did a pretty damn-good job indeed. If I was a striking academic then, I would compose a message, something along the lines of the following:

THIS IS A DIGITAL PICKET LINE

WORK IS NO LONGER A PLACE THAT YOU GO, BUT A THING THAT YOU DO. IF YOU ARE READING THIS MESSAGE YOU ARE BREAKING THE STRIKE.

I ENCOURAGE YOU TO STOP WORKING AND JOIN THE STRIKE.

THIS MESSAGE WAS INSPIRED BY BELLOGATE AND THE FINE WORK OF PROVOST MICHAEL ARTHUR.

I would then send this message, anonymously due to cowardice, to all the work email addresses of academic staff in the department. I would have no email list, but all these addresses are publically available online. I would also send it to all social media channels used by UCL anthropology research groups. And I would send it, automatically, again and again and again and again and again for the length of the strike. In the spirit of the 21st century, I would, in effect, troll for the cause.

Material World

A Global Hub for Thinking About Things

<http://www.materialworldblog.com>

Thank you for listening.