



Digital labour in the academic context: Challenges for academic staff associations

Paul Jones

abstract

Digital technologies create new opportunities and new challenges for university teachers, researchers and librarians. Under changing conditions of academic labour, how best to protect academic freedom?

Overview

The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) represents 65,000 teachers, researchers, librarians and other academic professionals at 122 colleges and universities across Canada. CAUT defends academic freedom, assists its members with collective bargaining and grievance handling and advocates on a range of public policy matters related to post-secondary education and the broader struggle for social justice.

Over the last decade the interaction between academic labour and digital technology has grown more complex, placing additional pressures on teachers, researchers and librarians and creating new challenges for academic unions. These developments have not occurred in a vacuum; they are unfolding against existing contradictions between public and private interests, between labour and capital.

Given this context, CAUT welcomed the announcement of the Digital Labour: Workers, Authors, Citizens conference and was pleased to be invited to speak at the event. Our presentation focused on three areas of particular concern: teaching, scholarly communication and copyright law.

Teaching

Digital technology is facilitating on-going efforts by employers to replace full-time, tenured positions with part-time, precarious employment. On-line education and the digitization of course material more easily allow the ‘unbundling’ of the teaching process into multiple, artificially delineated components, including course preparation, delivery, assessment and revision and interaction with students. Employer expropriation of course material is also facilitated by digital technology. Electronic documents are

physically easier to seize and re-distribute than written text and live performance. On the legal side, employers are arguing that their provision of the equipment and technical assistance utilized in course preparation provides a claim at law to ownership in the material.

The speed at which this technology was adopted initially placed academic staff in a defensive position. Through collective bargaining and grievance litigation, academic unions are now resisting this assault by protecting creator ownership in course material and attempting to secure the right of academic staff to collectively control and deliver courses.

Scholarly communication

Digital technology has provided academic staff an opportunity to assert greater control over the dissemination of their work. In recent years the cost of journal subscriptions has far out-paced inflation, forcing drastic reordering of library collection policies. In response to this crisis, academic staff are utilizing new technologies to claim control of scholarly communication. This is the 'open access' movement, facilitated by digital information systems that substantially reduce the distribution and reproduction costs of scholarly materials. Instead of creating and transferring journal articles to the private sector and buying them back at great cost, the academic community is 'eliminating the middleman' by establishing open access journals and institutional repositories for articles. While resistance from private publishing companies and some academic societies and faculty continues, and there are still serious financial issues to be resolved, the idea of an intellectual commons filled with freely available, peer-reviewed material is moving towards reality, facilitated by digital technology.

Copyright law

Over the last several years, successive governments have attempted to update the Copyright Act to reflect developments in digital technology. The copyright amendment process has traditionally been an unhappy one for the academic community and users of creative works more generally. Publishers and entertainment conglomerates have typically been able to secure ever more restrictive legislation at the expense of educators, students, librarians and the general public.

This situation has changed. A powerful coalition of groups and individuals representing the interests of the users of copyright material has been able to repeatedly halt the passage of new copyright law. This is a victory, as the proposals presented in Canadian Parliament represented a serious threat to academic labour, especially the ability to fair deal digital materials for purposes of research, review, private study and criticism.

This success is due in part to the contribution of faculty who in the role of public intellectuals have shaped popular opinion and mobilized opposition to the corporate copyright agenda. Figures such as Laura Murray at Queen's University, Sam Trosow at The University of Western Ontario and Michael Geist at the University of Ottawa

deserve great credit in this regard. These scholar-activists have provided CAUT with the analysis and advice that has formed the basis of the organization's copyright advocacy. Working in alliance with groups such as the Canadian Federation of Students and the Canadian Federation for Humanities and Social Sciences, CAUT has forced education and library issues into the copyright debate. New legislation will be introduced into parliament soon. Through the combination of critical scholarly analysis and traditional political work including letter-writing, op-eds, meeting MPs, attending government consultations, the position has been forcibly advanced that in the new digital environment the Copyright Act must serve the public interest and not simply the needs of private corporations.

Looking forward

The conference overview for 'Digital Labour: Workers, Authors, Citizens' indicated that new information technologies are creating both challenges and opportunities for workers. For academic unions this is certainly true, as these examples of teaching, scholarly communication and copyright reform demonstrate.

In addressing these challenges and opportunities, the conference assisted CAUT by providing a forum to present an overview of its work in the area and, more importantly, to meet activists and individual academics concerned with digital labour issues. A better world will be built, in part, by progressive academics working with CAUT and their academic staff associations to meld theory and analysis into practical action plans.

the author

Paul Jones is a Professional Officer with the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT). Before joining CAUT he practiced law at an Ottawa union side labour law firm. Prior to his career as a lawyer, Paul worked for a variety of environmental and community organizations, including the Ontario Public Interest Group. At CAUT the focus of his work is public policy matters, with particular emphasis on research ethics, scholarly communication and intellectual property issues. He is also the Professional Officer assigned to the CAUT Librarians Committee.
E-mail: jones@caut.ca