Epilogue

TAB: Take Academia Back!

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As academic capitalism spreads, universities abandon traditional meritocratic and collegial governance to hunt money, prestige, and a stronger brand. Here in Sweden, this shift has been especially profound: since the 1980s, the university system has been deregulated, and its core principles gradually replaced by management practices from the corporate world. (Sweden)

When teachers get the message they can’t push or challenge students, we end up with fellow citizens, neighbours, and co-workers who are inflexible, threatened by difference, and lacking in critical-thinking skills. Parents may think they want comfortable intellectual spaces for their dear college-age children, but if they really want their children to grow into strong, capable thinkers, they want professors who feel safe to host unsettling conversations, to provide unexpected lessons, and to go where students need, rather than want, to go in order to develop. (United States)

The Manning Centre, a right-wing think tank founded by former Reform Party leader Preston Manning, is calling for an ideological cleansing of Canadian universities. ‘Canada’s post secondary system needs an ideological enema,’ the think tank writes in a new Facebook post. (Canada)

These are all recent posts on the Facebook site TAB: Take Academia Back! I set up this site in 2014 following a conversation with Ann Braithwaite (University of Prince Edward Island) and Penelope Ironstone (Wilfrid Laurier University) about the onslaught of privatization and managerialism in Canadian universities. We talked about how seriously such changes were eroding the life and work of academics and students, and lamented how few collegial spaces were available in which to talk about these issues. We shared our frustrations and thought others might wish to do the same. Our brainstorming for a name for our proposed site landed on TAB: Take Academia Back! We embraced the name and also its association with cats, which as everyone knows dominate the internet and captivate its users. Cats evoke a unique blend of companionship and irony that an-

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imates what we do when we connect online, a form of mediation that is coincidentally a subject of my own research. Our artists somehow understood the connection between cats and anger, which may not be obvious to everyone, and created a perfect logo for us. TABbies share with the cat icons a pointed humour about judgment and peer review that encourages us to connect, to laugh, and to pounce, that is to say, to pass severe judgment on what is happening.

Our collegial conversation took place soon after a strike at York University, during which the faculty association had no communication strategy or newspaper, the multi-union newsletter Critical Times had been terminated, and both the faculty club and the grad student lounge had been closed. The university administration expected this latest strike to sputter and die just as the last one had. Things did not happen that way. The strikers were widely supported by students who made extensive use of social media. The public had begun to recognize that universities were in trouble, that this was not the fault of the unions, and that precarity was a real problem. The administration lost the public relations war and agreed to meet the demands of CUPE 3903.

Obviously, precarity and managerialism are not concerns unique to York. TAB gives us a chance to share our experiences and to strengthen our knowledge and sense of community. An outstanding example of this process was the 100 texts posted daily by 100 faculty and students in 2015. These texts were in response to the “100-Day Listening Tour” launched by the president of Western University, Amit Chakma, who hoped to recover from a scandal about his inflated earnings. This was not the response he expected. Each day another articulate and inventive letter to the president appeared on Tumblr and on TAB. The public letters addressed and became part of the public event, and they showed what can be accomplished through collaborative critique unfolding over the real time of institutional events.

This is not to say that Facebook is always open where other media are not. In 2016 a number of Facebook sites critical of the principal candidates in the U.S. election were sabotaged and discussions on other sites disappeared from the record. Palestine disappeared altogether from Google Maps. Those who believed that social media like Facebook and Google were free and uncensored were dismayed by such overt interference. Closer to our present concerns, in September 2016, Academia.edu, a formerly cost-free site used for the online circulation of academic research, announced changes to the site that asked users to recommend and rate articles; this also involved a “privileged members” status with paid access to the ratings data. Academia.edu invited feedback for this plan from some of its “recommended” scholars, myself included, but the group almost universally condemned the proposed reorganization and commodification of the site, some commenting articulately and at length about the issues of ratings and the commodification of research. Not surprisingly, the response did not affect the outcome. Another “public” space was being monetized, showing that there are no real substitutes for open communication on public platforms in higher education.

While there are no perfect places, TAB has been a valuable resource for discussing such developments. It now has more than 1,350 members from Canada and around the world. Members post news and critical perspectives on corporatization, academic freedom, precarity, pedagogy, student debt, financial and funding scandals, and university
governance. These posts make it possible to discern patterns and differences across borders and institutions. As we academics struggle to navigate managerial surveillance, onerous budget accountabilities, eroding tenure, and the exuberant real estate expansions these impositions enable, and while we drown in endless performance reviews as managers incite us to market our research competitively with one another, TAB has provided a useful space to follow, share, and critique such developments. All academics are welcome to join the TAB community and participate in these public discussions. Find the TAB site at https://www.facebook.com/groups/622766154521199.