

## **Where the power lies**

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Over the last few days Lancaster has experienced prolonged and significant power cuts. This has produced a complicated and shifting geography of power, at different scales. Coming into Lancaster from the motorway, last night there was a point beyond which there were no street or traffic lights. One response has been to move activity and people out of this dark zone. Lancaster University took this measure fast, cancelling the last week of term and suggesting that students make their way home: home to where the power is on.

Back in the 'dark zone', it is not now entirely dark. In some areas power returns, related to usually 'hidden' features - old peoples' homes, proximity to the hospital – suddenly revealed in lights. These zones prove to be accidently home to other services: a fish and chip shop is open in just such a zone and queues form. Within the University we are able to write this now owing to the proximity of our offices to the canteen currently providing free food to the students who remain. This, and the Great Hall - to be the scene of a graduation ceremony tomorrow- are linked to a generator.

## **Generating zones of activity**

Not surprisingly power spreads out from generators. The more puzzling feature is where it goes and which buildings are linked to which. New conjunctions and 'areas' appear: they have always been there, but connected by a usually invisible infrastructure that has suddenly popped into view. Between these connected patches there are some remaining puzzles: how come there are still Christmas lights on in *that* area when all around is dark?

We are seeing the mini-geographies of electric power: at the moment they flicker – spaces come 'on' and go 'off' line – meaning there are roaming populations of power-seeking people, plugging laptops and mobile phones, hoarding battery power where and when they can. Some people stay at work when they would otherwise be elsewhere: as one said: "what's the point in going home, there is nothing I can do there".

Familiar activities are happening in different places and new locations are being made: we learn that private landlords in the city are sending students to the campus rightly expecting that they will find food and drink, warmth, and maybe some Internet connection as well. Meanwhile, on the campus there is an ongoing relocation of activities as daily priorities take hold: a job interview is switched to a building that happens to have power. Preparations for tomorrow's graduation mean that bedding is shifted from one end of the campus to another and students are now skilled in locating showers in buildings they've never been into before. Sometime later today, new generators will arrive, opening up new pockets of activity as the power comes on.

## **Interconnections**

There are other critical geographies linked to those of power. We learn about shifting and also flickering zones of mobile phone reception: places where the signal used to be good and strong do not exist at all, and other sites, like Lancaster castle become new-found hotspots of connectivity. Meanwhile, 'old' infrastructures (phone boxes) are revived, and new skills are acquired (not everyone knows how to use a phone box). The Internet, somewhere between power and phone

system, experiences a rhythm of its own: pausing for a while and then producing a sudden surge of email, as if an invisible blockage is removed.

These places – of power, of phone connection, of Internet – do not always map on to each other: you can have a signal but no power – and different configurations appear to form and disappear. At the same time, and for those who seek them out, there are ‘magic spots’: places that are totally equipped.. power, phone, Internet, heating, printers, the lot (DEMAND is one such spot.) More broadly, this shifting mixture generates disjointed and disconnected networks of communication, resulting in not up to date updates, mixed messages, rumours and information of varying qualities.

Ironically the ‘official’ systems rely on emails and tweets (but cannot rely on the Internet). At this point the local radio takes over, acting as a ‘space’ spanner – bridging between those with and without Internet, and relaying information from place to place. More immediately there are handwritten boards and notes for people who happen to be in the right place, digital signs for those who have power and an ongoing and apparently effective stream of chatter between people in yellow jackets. Not only are there new spaces and areas, new hierarchies of power and authority also emerge. As the day goes on, and across this dynamically patchy landscape, new messages arrive – in fits and starts – about using less power to preserve the system as a whole.

### **Adapting and dipping demand**

What do we learn from this experience? First, and as expected, we get to ‘see’ infrastructures laid bare – we really do see the wire coming from the generator going into the building. Second we are confronted with a flood of unanswered questions about how power in fact works in daily life – what is the link with mobile phones and Internet, just how do these connections work? We also discover an extensive reservoir of adaptability and persistence. Different people each with their own plans for the day, figure out how to move from one place to another to achieve their daily tasks. This is not a question of shifting peak loads in time, but of moving activities to places of power, and distinguishing between those which do and do not need electricity, or connectivity. In short we see, for a moment, a totally new geography of demand.