



CHAPTER 1

Postdigital Participation in Education: An Introduction

Andreas Weich and Felicitas Macgilchrist

SETTING THE STAGE

In recent years, digital technology has become an integral part of everyday practices—a condition that has been labeled “postdigital” in a number of academic publications. Although this label is ambiguous, most authors seek to overcome the assumption that “progress” is driven by digital technology and that society, culture, and the economy must adapt to the new situation. Assuming society and/or culture to be postdigital means to focus on the entanglement of the digital and analog, material and symbolic, technology and sociality. In this approach, the prefix “post” does not mean that digitality has become irrelevant or been “overcome.” Instead, it contextualizes the digital, locating it in a set of relations within

A. Weich (✉)

Leibniz Institute for Educational Media | Georg Eckert Institute,
Braunschweig, Germany
e-mail: andreas.weich@gei.de

F. Macgilchrist

Department of Educational Sciences, University of Oldenburg,
Oldenburg, Germany

© The Author(s) 2023

A. Weich, F. Macgilchrist (eds.), *Postdigital Participation in Education*, Palgrave Studies in Educational Media,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-38052-5_1

specific media constellations. The “post” thus invites critical analysis of interwoven, messy elements and interconnections.

These interrelationships and correlations are at the analytical focus of this book, with a particular interest in participation. As the COVID-19 pandemic has made obvious, contemporary media constellations can facilitate communication and collaboration for remote or isolated people or people facing barriers to mobility, but they also require material resources such as technical devices and connectivity as well as the knowledge, ability and energy to use them fluently. In addition, participation in the “post-digital condition” is already woven into power relations and political economies. This book understands the postdigital condition with its complex media constellations as a precondition of participatory processes themselves. These preconditions shape how participation is being conceptualized and put into practice, who can participate, and how.

Against this backdrop, education plays a crucial role. On the one hand, educational institutions and practices are deeply affected by the recent transformations of media technologies and practices. At the same time, educational institutions such as schools and universities are tasked with enabling people to participate in today’s media practices in an informed and reflective way. It is therefore important to analyze how and under what conditions educators and students can participate in contemporary media constellations.

MAPPING POSTDIGITAL PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION

Within contemporary “western culture,” there is hardly any kind of meaningful action that is not connected to digital technology in one way or another. In the obvious sense, this refers to the fact that most people use digital infrastructures such as the Internet and digital devices such as smartphones in nearly all life situations: communicating with friends and family, buying goods online, paying in stores, navigating, searching for information on diverse topics, banking, dating, fitness tracking, reading e-books, streaming series and movies, playing games, and so on. In the subtler sense of this assumption, it also refers to the oft-unnoticed implementations of digital technology in devices such as cars or fridges, in data centers and “clouds,” political decision-making, healthcare, financial economy, and the production and distribution of goods based on data and algorithms. In this reading, even the seemingly most analog process of buying a newspaper in a store with cash is pervaded with digitality: the

editorial staff of the newspaper used digital media for research, production, and printing; the ordering by the store and transport from the press to the store were organized by digital technologies; and even at the check-out the system will register that the newspaper has been sold, note the other goods that were bought with it, and that it was paid for in cash. Negroponte's statement of twenty-five years ago seems to have come true:

Its literal form, the technology, is already beginning to be taken for granted, and its connotation will become tomorrow's commercial and cultural compost for new ideas. Like air and drinking water, being digital will be noticed only by its absence, not its presence. [...] Computers as we know them today will a) be boring, and b) disappear into things that are first and foremost something else [...] Computers will be a sweeping yet invisible part of our everyday lives [...]. (Negroponte, 1998)

The notion of the “postdigital” assumes that digital technologies are already deeply woven into everyday practices and have lost their novelty value per se, but have by no means become less relevant as a result. Cramer writes that the prefix ‘post’ should be understood in the sense that postcolonialism “does not in any way mean an end of colonialism [...], but, rather, is mutation into new power structures, less obvious but no less pervasive” (Cramer, 2015, p. 14 f.). Or, as Sinclair and Hayes put it: “the prefix post(-) signals that we have something to talk about” (Sinclair & Hayes, 2019, p. 129). Stemming from discourses on art, the term “post-digital” has established itself in recent years as a common “counter-concept” to that of digitalization and its varieties, not least in educational science and philosophy (Jandrić et al., 2018). But what characterizes post-digital research and what does the postdigital imply for a theory-driven analysis of contemporary education?

Striano distinguishes between three conceptions of the postdigital, first as a description of the contemporary world, that is, “the post-digital condition as a situation in which digital has become part of everyday use and has become integrated into everyday life, action and gestures”; second, as a critical-analytical perspective considering “that the term post-digital should refer to a critical reflection on digital, to a full awareness of the influence of digital culture and technologies on our modes of perception, cognition and action”; and, third, as a kind of policy or goal: “If we consider that a more aware class of users is a goal to pursue, in order to avoid risks related to the reckless use of new technologies, then we must

understand post-digital as an aim to be achieved” (Striano, 2019, pp. 83–84). Given this assemblage of meanings, he concludes that “a good media theory is needed” (Striano, 2019, p. 84). We, the authors of this chapter, also observe these three parallel uses of the concept, but while Striano finds a “good media theory” in the technological determinism of media archaeology, we assume that “what digitality does to us and what we do with digitality [...] depends on the specific contexts in which digital technologies are embedded” (Macgilchrist, 2019).

A critical analysis of (educational) media in view of the “postdigital condition” as defined above, requires then, in addition to analyzing the formatting, contents, or materiality of any given media technologies, the analysis of the contexts of the technology and/or the practices in which it is embedded. One way to grasp this kind of analytical perspective is to orient to “media constellations” (Weich, 2020, 2023 and Weich et al. in this volume). This approach does not assume media to be distinct objects with “medial qualities” but sees mediality as a product of inter- and intrarelations (Barad, 2005) between (a) materialities, (b) knowledges and practices, (c) subject positions, and (d) contents. Orienting to media constellations in this way reminds analysts that there is no digital education but there are digital materialities and digitally processed contents that inter- and intrarelate with educational practices, knowledges, and subjectification processes. It is not education itself that is digital but education is related to and pervaded by digital materialities and contents. Fawns, for example, describes the conceptual aberrations that are produced in the context of the label “digital education” and concludes: “What is required, then, is a perspective that recognises that neither learning nor teaching are, themselves, digital. Instead, interactions with digital technology are simply an integrated part of wider teaching and learning activity. [...] One possible way forward is to take a postdigital perspective on education” (Fawns, 2019, p. 141 f.). Key to this perspective is that it does not reduce media to tools for educational purposes or focus on individual critical competencies or literacies. Pushing this forward with the notion of media constellations, media can be seen as the foundation of education and *Bildung*, where the latter refers to the constitution and transformation of self- and world relations. There is no education, in this sense, without media. But if we consider media as a precondition of our realities, one goal of rendering postdigital constellations accessible is to reflect on them critically and to shape and reshape them within novel imaginations of what the future can hold. If these novel imaginations are thought out with the

dominant structures, ideologies, or discourse of contemporary society, the question is how participation unfolds in the postdigital condition.

But “participation” is also a tricky concept. In many parts of the world, people can, are invited to, and/or are supposed to want to participate in a variety of ways and contexts: in social and cultural activities (e.g. sports, museums, social media), the labor market and capitalist production (e.g. having a job, consuming goods), or political decision-making (e.g. parliamentary elections, neighborhood or parent-teacher associations). In recent decades, participation has become a kind of imperative across many fields of practice (Declercq et al., 2021). “The more participation, the better” seems to be an almost unquestioned consensus—or who would disagree?

On a more systematic level, we can differentiate between participation as (1) taking part in something and as (2) having a (more-or-less decisive) say in decision-making processes. In terms of the former (taking part in something), participation can be seen as a fundamental precondition of culture. On this level, it means being part of a culture by, for example, consuming and/or producing cultural products and generating shared meaning within cultural practices. According to Roose and Daenekindt (2015), building on Bourdieu’s work, this could be framed as “cultural participation” that “ranges from high to low, from arts participation and consumption of highbrow cultural products (e.g., visiting museums, attending the opera, and reading books) to consumption of lowbrow products (e.g., listening to rock music or going to the movies)” (447). With regard to media and participation, this means to use media in consuming and perhaps also producing content, and it requires access to technology as well as the skills and willingness to engage in interaction (Carpentier, 2011, p. 69 and 129ff.).¹ A lack of access or interaction is frequently problematized in terms of a “participation gap,” most prominently in regard to the “participatory culture” described by Jenkins (2006). Participatory culture focuses on the different ways in which people can contribute to media culture or digital culture via interactions and/or content (for an overview see Cuntz-Leng et al., 2015). The notion of

¹Whereas Carpentier sees access and interaction as a part of participation in the earlier chapters of his book (which would be the first aspect in our differentiation: taking part in something), he comes to distinguish between them in later chapters, seeing participation as bound to decision-making (which would be the second aspect of our differentiation: having a say in decision-making processes).

closing the participation gap can be seen as both an empowering inclusion of formerly excluded people and an imperative that demands people join existing media economies of consumption and production. So although this understanding of participation is not linked to formalized or even institutionalized decision-making, it is still an inherently political concept as it raises the question of who can and who does participate in a given culture and who is excluded for which reasons. But the politics of participation also lie in the sense that everyday culture is inherently political: the choices around how to participate—and how to structure others' participation—in what kind of cultural practices by consuming and producing which kind of (material and symbolic) products matter.

In terms of the second sense of participation noted above (having a say in decision-making processes), participation can be seen in a more formal or institutionalized sense of the political. It concerns which role groups or individuals play in decision-making processes. A diagrammatic key concept for this is the “ladder of citizen participation” proposed by Arnstein (1969) more than fifty years ago, which has seen a vast number of iterations and variations since (see Fig. 1.1).

This diagram provides a clear and linear hierarchy from “nonparticipation” at the bottom to “citizen control” at the top, and reflects the tendency towards the “participation-imperative” mentioned above. As Christopher Kelty puts it: “Built into the form of the ladder is a normative claim about participation: the point is to go up the ladder, not down it, toward citizen power and away from manipulation” (2020, p. 173). Kelty notes that, despite the focus in Arnstein’s writing on community participation, the image of the ladder suggests that it is (autonomous) individuals who climb the ladder, rather than groups or collectives. The idea of the “participation gap” mentioned above in terms of cultural participation can also be applied on the basis of this imperative: when (individual) citizens should or could be high up on the ladder but in fact are not, a gap appears that needs to be closed. A legitimate question is, however, who *should* even participate and *to what end*, or in Kelty’s words: “Participation in what?” (ibid., p. 1). So we should not only take into account whether or not participation is actually being achieved but also which aims and values go along with it.

Another important issue is that, if taken seriously, participation is by no means guaranteed once the decision has been made to implement it. It is not a clean, well-organized, totally manageable, and “formatted” (ibid., 10) process as diagrams such as “The Ladder” might suggest, but a messy

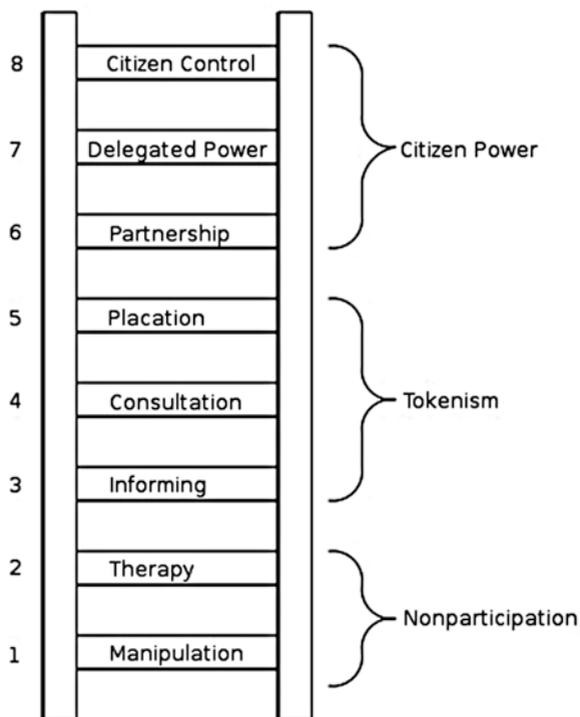


Fig. 1.1 The ladder (Source: Arnstein, 1969)

and fundamentally political process. According to Kelty, it is an “experience [that] differs from, and creates tensions or difficulties with, the instrumental and formatted expressions” of participation (ibid., 10). It can shatter hierarchies, question certainties, and lead to perplexities between different individual or collective actors within the participatory endeavor (Poltze et al., 2022).

Against this backdrop, this book understands postdigital participation in education as, first, participation in contemporary educational media practices that constitute our day-to-day realities and are connected within socio-technical constellations, and second, participation in processes that influence the preconditions of these educational realities. It has aimed to curate a set of contributions that address the postdigital condition and also take a critical analytical perspective on what is often called “digital education.”

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book explores in depth a number of issues and levels of postdigital participation in education. Although the notion of postdigitality has already covered fruitful ground in education science and education philosophy (with the *Journal of Postdigital Science and Education* and Springer's associated book series *Postdigital Science and Education* as a kind of central institution), there is still (and will be in the years to come) a need for conceptual and analytical work at the nexus of the postdigital condition, postdigital perspectives, and specific issues, such as, in our case, participation and education. The first part of the book thus aims at *Mapping the Postdigital Condition in Education*. It begins with Nina Grünberger's "Participation as a Key Principle of Education for Sustainable Development in the Postdigital Era," which raises questions on the relationships between digital technology, sustainability, and education. The next chapter, "Social Participation in a Postdigital–Biodigital Age" by Petar Jandrić and Sarah Hayes, shows how the current focus on infopolitics must urgently be expanded to include biopolitics and related inequities following recent advances in the biosciences and in response to challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Just as the postdigital condition and the media involved in it open up wide-reaching potential for certain people to participate, it also creates new barriers for others. The chapter "Postdigital *Bildung* as a Guiding Principle to Foster Inclusion in Educational Media" by Marlene Pieper, Till Neuhaus, and Michaela Vogt combines philosophical perspectives on the notions of postdigitality and *Bildung* focusing on Open Educational Resources in a project on inclusive learning materials. Anke Redecker's chapter "Distance Learning and the Question of Educational Justice: A Dialogic Approach to Digital Diversity in Schools" shows how drill-and-practice and e-portfolios have been widely promoted since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting on the challenges in terms of inclusion that the situation has brought. She argues that using video conferencing in a dialogical approach can diminish such obstacles.

Education and educational media are domains that *both* operate under the condition of postdigitality *and* generate knowledge about postdigitality. This is the focus of the second part of the book, *Performing and Reflecting on the Postdigital Condition with Learners*. In their chapter "Learning Academic Practices: Enabling Students to Participate in a Postdigital Society," Jennifer Grüntjens, Maike Altenrath, Sabrina Schaper, and Sandra Hofhues describe research-based teaching as a way to foster academic abilities in students that at the same time provide reflexive insights into the

postdigital condition in general. The chapter “Expanding the Pedagogical Space: Co-design and Participation in an Online Postgraduate Course” by Tim Fawns, Gill Aitken, Yathu Maheswaran and Kanastana Yasotharan, describes and reflects on a thematically open online course and the practices and power relations that go along with its co-creative approach. In “Let’s Figure it Out: Participatory Methods for Reflecting on Educational Media in a Postdigital World,” Andreas Weich, Ina Schiering, Michael Friedewald, Philipp Deny, and Marvin Priedigkeit describe and combine approaches and workshop concepts from media constellation analysis and data protection impact assessments, reflecting on postdigital educational media from a participatory perspective. Marko Teräs, Hanna Teräs, and Juha Suoranta show in their chapter “From Official Document Utopias to Collective Utopian Imagination” how an empathy-based stories approach can generate utopias that exceed the boundaries of hegemonic narratives. Finally, Eva Kleinlein’s chapter “Asynchronous Narrative Audio-Messages: An Internet-Based Qualitative Method for Data Collection in International Research” outlines and discusses how the everyday practice of audio messaging can be used to generate rich research data.

The last chapter is a postscript that explores how the volume as a whole responds to its initial guiding question: “How do contemporary media constellations shape participation?”

REFERENCES

- Arnstein, S. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 35(4), 216–224.
- Barad, K. (2005). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. In C. Bath, Y. Bauer, & B. B. von Wülfingen (Eds.), *Materialität denken. Studien zur technologischen Verkörperung—Hybride Artefakte, posthumane Körper*. Transcript.
- Carpentier, N. (2011). *Media and participation. A site of ideological-democratic struggle*. Intellect.
- Cramer, F. (2015). What is ‘post-digital’? In D. Berry & M. Dieter (Eds.), *Postdigital aesthetics: Art, computation and design*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cuntz-Leng, V., Einwächter, S. G., & Stollfuß, S. (2015). Perspektiven auf Partizipationskultur: Eine Auswahl. *MEDIENwissenschaft: Rezensionen | Reviews*, 32(4). <https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2015.4.4037>
- Declercq, J., Jacobs, G., Macgilchrist, F., & Vandendaele, A. (Eds.). (2021). *Participation, engagement and collaboration in Newsmaking: A postfoundational perspective*. John Benjamins.
- Fawns, T. (2019). Postdigital education in design and practice. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 1(1), 132–145.

- Jandrić, P., Knox, J., Besley, T., Ryberg, T., Suoranta, J., & Hayes, S. (2018). Postdigital science and education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50(10), 893–899. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2018.1454000>
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century*. John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.
- Kelty, C. (2020). *The participant: A century of participation in four stories*. University of Chicago Press.
- Macgilchrist, F. (2019). *Postdigitale Schule*. Blog des Forum Bildung Digitalisierung. <https://www.forumbd.de/blog/postdigitale-schule/>
- Negroponce, N. (1998). Beyond digital. *Wired*, December 1998.
- Poltze, K., Demuth, K., Eke, S., Moebus, A., & Macgilchrist, F. (2022). Erfahrungen des Partizipierens: Reflexionen zu partizipativen Forschungs- und Gestaltungsprozessen. *Bildungsforschung*, 2 (*Gemeinsam mit Bildungspraxis? Wege, Dynamiken, Klärungen*).
- Roose, H., & Daenekindt, S. (2015). Trends in cultural participation. In J. D. Wright (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (Vol. 5, 2nd ed.). Elsevier.
- Sinclair, C., & Hayes, S. (2019). Between the post and the com-post: Examining the Postdigital ‘work’ of a prefix. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 1(1), 119–131.
- Striano, F. (2019). Towards ‘post-digital’: A media theory to re-think the digital revolution. *Ethics in Progress*, 10(1), 83–93.
- Weich, A. (2020). Digitale Medien und Methoden: Andreas Weich über die Medienkonstellationsanalyse. In *Open-Media-Studies-Blog*, 16 June 2020. <https://www.zfmedienwissenschaft.de/online/open-media-studies-blog/digitale-medien-und-methoden-weich>
- Weich, A. (2023). Medienkonstellationsanalyse. In S. Stollfuß, L. Niebling, & F. Raczkowski (Eds.), *Handbuch Digitale Medien und Methoden*. Springer VS.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

