Postdigital Childhoods in the Time of Anthropocene

Nina Hood¹ · Marek Tesar¹

Published online: 23 July 2019
© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2019

Social scientists have adopted an argument that we have now entered the era of the Anthropocene. Anthropocene to the philosophers and postdigital thinkers has become interesting as it has marked the first human-made era from which there is no return. The impact humans and their activities are having on the planet is resulting in irreversible environmental changes. The Anthropocene, the current geological age, is an epoch in which human becoming and human activity have become the dominant influence, and force, on both the environment and climate, and on the human conditions living on the planet. As such, this has become a subject of ‘precarious times’. This precarity is manifest in irreversible environmental damage and corresponding far-ranging implications including population displacement on a yet incomprehensible scale, increased competition for resources, and growing tension and discontent between and within nations.

While scientists have been determining mid- to long-term effects of these uncertainties and tensions, educators are yet to fully engage with all the challenges, knowledges, and complexities associated with the Anthropocene, and most particularly, the implications of the era for humankind and all children (Duhn et al. 2017). What are the impacts on education in our age? How should educators respond to a call for collective action (collective in the sense of human collective; but also in the sense of the coalition of countries and states establishing eco-parameters to meet or banning ‘plastic bags’, which has become the embodiment of human action)?

Simultaneously, the linear understanding of what ‘digital’ is has changed. Digital, once considered to be a complex turn that was dubbed as ‘revolutionizing’ the human condition and bringing the benefits and comforts to all human subjects, has now been surpassed. Furthermore, the digital turn now is considered to be part of history, which is worth researching in its own right. The digital increasingly is giving way to the postdigital, a world where the distinction between digital and nondigital has faded.

✉ Nina Hood
n.hood@auckland.ac.nz

Marek Tesar
m.tesar@auckland.ac.nz

¹ The University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

Where the virtual and the ‘real’ can no longer be separated, the digital is intertwined with all parts of human life (Jandrić et al. 2018).

This intertwining of human and digital in the postdigital world exists in a particular tension with the human-centric positioning of the Anthropocene, where to be human remains a distinct, elevated entity. The postdigital world encapsulates the turmoil and nebulous nature of relationships among non-human and human elements that shape our contexts. The separation and dichotomy between digital and non-digital, between virtual and ‘real’, are increasingly problematic. The ‘real’ has become contested. Baudrillard’s hyperreality has become the everyday and mundane—the truth and the fictions have become one in the post-truth world of 2019 (Tesar 2017).

Cormier et al. (2019) argue that:

The intersection of technology and the social has often been a driver of social change. The mainstreaming and mass production of powerful digital tools has had a profound effect on the way that we live and learn. These digital tools have allowed us to speed up communication, publish our thoughts in any number of ways, and allowed for new complex forms of collaboration. The speed and reach of this transition has had a profound effect on what it means to be a participant in society. The speed of the change, however, has left us with the mistaken belief that social change was somehow ‘created’ by the digital rather than simply played out on the canvas of the digital that the digital itself is the main driver of change. We would argue the opposite. This ontological error has had us move towards placing technology at the forefront (think e-learning as distance learning) and moving our focus away from the people involved in these processes, the needs that they have and the skills that they bring. (Cormier et al. 2019: 3)

And it is the ontological turn that the scholars refer to above that highlights the way digital has become part of our lives that has superseded the separation of ‘digital world’ and ‘real world’. As such, both virtual and augmented reality has become part of our everyday existence. We are no longer worried about the ‘visible digital environment’. We have become one—we have merged and incorporated seamlessly into one (pedagogical) postdigital space. The ‘post’ does not mean, in this instance, that digital does not exist anymore. Quite the opposite, it means that it exists within new and enhanced conditions (see for example, Fawns 2019 and Sinclair and Hayes 2019).

The other notion that the quote above has elevated as an important ‘concept’ to consider is the notion of ‘speed’. With the degree and speed of change, driven by often competing technological, ecological and environmental, political, economic, and social forces, there is an uncertainty permeating how people are engaging with the world. In particular, new questions are arising around the experiences and life trajectories of young children, who are born into rapidly changing, uncertain times. We frame this discussion by some of these questions. What does the ‘postdigital Anthropocene’ mean for young children? For those born into this new world order? While every generation questions the future and what it will mean for future generations, these questions seem to be amplified currently.

For children, the dominance of the human encapsulated by the Anthropocene contrasted with the fluidity of material and non-material, human and non-human in the postdigital age will be the only known. There will be an ever-present tension for these children. They will inhabit the postdigital world with the relative ease of someone

who has known nothing else. Yet, this will be punctured and constrained by the boundaries of binaries imposed by others, who have known the (pre)digital age.

Our understanding of what it means to be human is radically different from the understanding of technology and digital. Despite the growing intertwining of the digital world, a prevailing notion of technology and digital as something separate and distinct from the human and the human condition remains. For example, MOOCs have in the past decades become the synonym of the rise, power, and rule of the digital which portrays the future of learning for both children and adults. Littlejohn and Hood (2018) argue that:

It is clear that education systems, in their traditional forms, are not structured to facilitate the range of learning opportunities that are required in the twenty-first century. MOOCs, and open online learning in general, are providing exciting new models of learning. However, as [we argue], while these models create new opportunities, in many cases they simply are reinforcing traditional educational models and outdated hierarchies in education. It is vital to reconceptualise learning in the digital age to harness the democratising potential of MOOCs. (Littlejohn and Hood 2008: 107)

What does this reconceptualizing learning look like for children in the time of Anthropocene, in the time of digital? We still perceive ‘innocent’ and ‘child’ in line with how we perceive a childhood (James and Prout 2015). Digital does not create a new reality; it rather merges the existing. What is real is no longer needed. We move away from discrete, interdependent objects with clearly defined boundaries and instead embrace situated, relational entanglements that are always shifting.

The postdigital era perhaps provides us with some answers to these dilemmas. As Jandrić et al. (2018: 893) argue, ‘We are increasingly no longer in a world where digital technology and media is separate, virtual, “other” to a “natural” human and social life.’ Perhaps we live in an era where ‘real’ and ‘digital’ are becoming intrinsically connected, and we are forced to radically reconsider what it means to be a child, or what to have a childhood may mean, in the postdigital world.

The increasing permeability of boundaries between human and nonhuman in the postdigital era has perhaps a surprising connection to a growing body of scholarship from scholars concerned by the human-centric, human-dominated nature of the Anthropocene (Tesar 2016). This scholarship has created ideas about removing fully ontologically developed human from the pedestal, while perceiving the importance of relationality between human and non-human entities and their shared agency. This idea of shared agency, which positions are to be ‘all together’ in the Anthropocene, as an interesting point that helps us to re-conceptualize what digital, or postdigital, could be perceived. This links into the technology and digital backlash occurring in certain circles, the drive by adults to remove children from postdigital.

The media is full of stories of parents (and increasingly educators) concerned about over-connected young people (i.e. Bowles 2019). Researchers have fueled some of this concern, with research documenting seemingly conflicting positions on the impact of technology on young people. In reality, however, it seems that research on this topic is inconclusive (see for example Domoff et al. 2017). There is further concern over how the rhetoric around the digital, especially in relation to education and childhoods, can run the risk of dehumanizing learning and education. As Hood 2018: 324–325) explains:

The discourse about digital technology too frequently dehumanizes the acts of learning and teaching. Current arrangements of digital education often have little to say with regard to individuals' relationships with others, and the social and political contexts in which they learn and act. While being responsive to individual students and ensuring individual students learn, we must also not lose sight of the collective, social enterprise that lies at the heart of education (but not always learning).

The discussion about young people tells us that we still do operate within the boundaries of binaries. Our understanding of what it means to be human is radically different from the understanding of technology and digital. We still perceive 'innocent' and 'child' in line with how we perceive a childhood. Digital does not create a new reality; it rather merges the existing realities. What is real is perhaps no longer needed; and what is needed needs to be reconceptualized within the Anthropocene.

References

- Bowles, N. (2019). Now some families are hiring coaches to help them raise phone-free children; Screen consultants are here to help you remember life before smartphones and tablets. (Spoiler: get a dog!). The New York Times, 6 July. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/06/style/parenting-coaches-screen-time-phones.html>. Accessed 20 July 2019.
- Cormier, D., Jandrić, P., Childs, M., Hall, R., White, D., Phipps, L., Truelove, I., Hayes, S., & Fawns, T. (2019). Ten years of the postdigital in the 52group: reflections and developments 2009–2019. *Postdigital Science and Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-019-00049-8>.
- Domoff, S. E., Harrison, K., Gearhardt, A. N., Gentile, D. A., Lumeng, J. C., & Miller, A. L. (2017). Development and validation of the problematic media use measure: a parent report measure of screen media "addiction" in children. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 8, 2–11. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000163>.
- Duhn, I., Malone, K., & Tesar, M. (2017). Troubling the intersections of urban/nature/childhood in environmental education. *Environmental Education Research*, 23(10), 1357–1368. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2017.1390884>.
- Fawns, T. (2019). Postdigital education in design and practice. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 1(1), 132–145. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-018-0021-8>.
- Hood, N. (2018). Re-imagining the nature of (student-focused) learning through digital technology. *Policy Futures in Education*, 16(3), 321–326. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210317742215>.
- James, A., & Prout, A. (2015). *Constructing and reconstructing childhood*. London: Routledge.
- 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>.
- Littlejohn, A., & Hood, N. (2018). *Reconceptualising learning in the digital age: The [un]democratising potential of MOOCs*. Singapore: Springer.
- 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. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-018-0017-4>.
- Tesar, M. (2016). Timing childhoods: an alternative reading of children's development through philosophy of time, temporality, place and space. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 17(4), 399–408. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949116677924>.
- Tesar, M. (2017). 2016: Living within the truth. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 49(6), 577. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1288794>.