A Cybernautic Anti-imperialist Movement: In Defense of Automated Bots

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On January 3, 2020, a US drone strike murdered 10 people in Baghdad, including Qasim Soleimani, an Iranian Major General and Commander of the elite Quds Force, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the Deputy Commander of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces. According to acting Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi, Soleimani was in Baghdad for a diplomatic engagement with Saudi Arabia as part of an ongoing secret effort to decrease tensions in the region. Such a brazen political assassination, in clear violation of Iraq's national sovereignty, sparked an international crisis that contained the possibility of a full-scale war in the Middle East and beyond.

Even before the assassination, US anti-war groups were planning a national day of action on January 4 in response to increasing US aggression in Iraq. Despite assurances from the Pentagon and political establishment that the strike was necessary to prevent 'imminent' attacks on US soldiers and assets, these protests quickly grew to include over 90 cities. Thousands of people flooded the streets as the world waited for Iran's warranted response, which came four days later as a carefully calibrated attack on two US bases in Iraq. Clearly designed to minimize any potential casualties while demonstrating its military capabilities, Iran even informed Iraq—which undoubtedly informed the USA—before striking. This gave Trump the ability to take a step down on the ladder of military escalation, although his administration quickly imposed a new round of sanctions against Iran, an economic and political tactic of war. The possibility of war is still with us at the time of this writing, however, as Trump also put forward a new 'red line:' the deaths of US soldiers, an inevitability so long as the USA continues to occupy and bomb the Middle East. On January 25, a new day of protest—this time global in scale—brought people out to protest in over 200 cities in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America.

This global struggle is unfolding in coordinates that are more than political, economic, geographic, and social; they are *postdigital*, too, and the articles included in this issue of *Postdigital Science and Education* (and, of course, other issues) can help us to better understand and intervene as we organize for peace and justice. Precisely because

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the postdigital signals the impossibility of cleaving the virtual from the material, the digital from the physical, our assessment, tactics, strategy, and goals must be located within the postdigital frame. Postdigital education is perhaps especially vital for social movements, as the traditional sites of education—especially in the Global North—either distort or, more frequently, omit the components and forms necessary for them. We learn, study, and teach about social struggles *from within* them, when we are 'face to face' in meetings and study groups and when we are 'online' reading, posting, and commenting. The modern protest itself is a postdigital phenomenon. Not only does *part* of the outreach before the protest take place online, but when we are actually at the protest we are communicating with each other through smart phones, walkie talkies, and other communication devices to make all sorts of decisions.

What's so striking about imperialism is the way in which, for those in the imperialist countries, it serves as a kind of invisible and unspoken frame through which the world is engaged. Consider the fact that, even as Democrats objected to Trump's assassination of Soleimani, they prefaced their remarks by condemning Soleimani or even expressing satisfaction with his murder. In other words, their objections were over the means and timing of his murder.

Cheryl E. Matias and Jared Aldern (2019) show us postdigital processes of identity formation and the ways in which identity hierarchies are reinscribed and resisted today. 'Whiteness,' they write, 'can be embodied before, during and/or after the digital interplay' as 'postdigitalism... can be used to reify whiteness.' Alternatively, the digital realm can showcase or expose—even to viral proportions—acts of whiteness and racism. The identities of individuals and organizations are formed through postdigital means as e-mail exchanges, digital media, and IRL interactions congeal in different and nuanced ways. This underscores the significance of Facebook's announcement that they will censor all Instagram posts—past, present, and future—that mourn Soleimani. Accounts that made the offending posts—including those of Iranian journalists and activists—were deleted *en masse*. Facebook said they were complying with US sanctions, although Twitter has not made a corresponding move. They could not restrict the physical iterations of mourning that united broad sections of Iraq and Iran in funeral processions, but the digital censorship has enormous implications for the construction of identities and beliefs of people in the USA, who are deprived of digital exposure to feelings, emotions, and beliefs that run counter to US imperialism.

Yet it's not just that these feelings, emotions, and beliefs are those of *physical* people. As John Reader and Maggi Savin-Baden (2019) caution, the distinction between physical and virtual people is not hard and fast, as each on their own and in relation are inhabited by contingency and uncertainty. Even if automated bots were responsible for some or all of the posts, this would not delegitimize them or make them false. Here we can think of social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, that delete accounts of suspected 'bots' for 'interfering' in US democracy by, for example, posting about racist police brutality. As Reader and Savin-Baden urge, we need modesty 'in truth claims, but also modesty in recognizing the day to day realities of our lives, the others on whom we depend, whether human or non-human, and the complexities which we all too often reduce to convenient generalities in order to manipulate and control.'

If I learn about a 'divisive' issue in the USA from an automated bot, is that learning invalidated? Is the virtuality of the poster even relevant at all? Curry Malott's (2019) article on the sublation of the digital is necessary at this point. Malott argues that, even

though digital technologies are increasingly mobilized against teachers and students, this must not be met with wholesale resistance to the technologies themselves, which would amount to digital Luddism. Malott shows the pedagogical nature of Marx's critique of the Luddite movement, which appreciates why sabotaging and destroying machinery would make some sense for workers (even if it would only give a pretext for repression). As Malott says, '[e]ven though Marx is highly critical of the Luddite orientation, he does not attack the workpeople for their error but expresses solidarity in his explanation.' The point is not to alienate but to educate, and so Marx shows that machinery *itself* is not the enemy and the task at hand is to *sublate* machinery into a new mode of production, one that is planned and organized around meeting people's needs rather than profit. Dismissing bot accounts or encouraging their removal is based on the same Luddite error. The question is how to *deploy* virtual humans in the struggle for peace and justice.

In doing so, our movement becomes more than human, more than animal: it becomes *cybernautic*. This is the name Tyson E. Lewis (2019) gives to the contemporary postdigital being. Building on his work with Richard Kahn that proposed an *exopedagogy* that moves beyond the animal-human divide, Lewis argues that the project must include moving beyond the analog/digital divide, as both 'are always already plugged into one another: a flesh electric.' The cybernaut is an entangling production that blurs the lines between physical and virtual beings, bringing together the organic and inorganic, the flesh and 'machines, codes, and screens.' Crucially, the cybernaut is not a leveling of differences, as if the destruction of the drone that assassinated Soleimani would bear any equivalence to the murder of Soleimani. Instead, the anti-imperialist cybernautic movement approaches—with modesty—the distinctions between and within species and technologies, investigating and articulating differences without reifying them, in order to build a new world free from imperialism and war. I'm not just arguing that physical humans should deploy virtual humans in this struggle, for such a proposal would only serve to harden the borders between the two. In fact, we might consider becoming more like bots, with their ability to spread, amplify, intervene, and direct.

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