Postdigital Research in the Time of Covid-19

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The First 80 Days of Covid-19

The first case of the coronavirus disease, Covid-19, was officially reported from Wuhan, China, on 31 December 2019 (World Health Organization 2020a). The coronavirus disease had initially been compared with an ordinary flu, and Dr. Li Wenliang, who raised the alarm in the early days of the outbreak, was investigated by the Chinese police and the Public Security Bureau for ‘spreading rumours’. Yet it soon became obvious that Covid-19 is far more dangerous than the flu, and Dr. Li Wenliang, aged 33, died of the infection on 7 February 2020 (Hegarty 2020). In spite of their harsh initial reactions to Dr. Li Wenliang’s alleged whistleblowing, Chinese authorities soon exhibited remarkable determination in containing the virus. By late January, they quarantined the city of Wuhan (11 million inhabitants) and several other areas affecting over 60 million of people. ‘Since February 18, China has reported the number of recovered cases is vastly outpacing the number of new confirmed cases each day.’ (Roper 2020). In the meantime, the coronavirus has crossed the borders of China, and Western countries have been much slower in their response. On 11 March, the World Health Organization ‘declared COVID-19 a pandemic, pointing to the over 118,000 cases of the coronavirus illness in over 110 countries and territories around the world and the sustained risk of further global spread’ (Ducharme 2020) and on 13 March, ‘[i]nternational health officials said Friday that Europe has become the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic, as the continent is now producing more new cases each day than China did at the height of its crisis’ (Coote and Jacobson 2020).

In popular media, the Covid-19 pandemic has started an infodemic of unprecedented scale; fake news and bullshit flourish alongside credible information from sources such as the World Health Organization. In the context of research, the Covid-19 pandemic has initiated historically unprecedented levels of collaboration and openness, prompting some authors to suggest that ‘[w]hen the story of the coronavirus (2019-nCoV) is finally written, it might well become a template for the utopian dream of open science — where research data is shared freely, unrestrained by competition, paywalls and

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patents’ (Crowe 2020). Worldwide closures of schools and universities have pushed millions of students and teachers online, bringing decades of experience in the field under the public eye (Bates 2020). Commentators compare Chinese and Western responses to the crisis, often under bombastic titles such as ‘Coronavirus and the Clash of Civilizations’ (Mações 2020). Political scientists discuss whether the pandemic is an argument for total dismissal of capitalism or just a passing aberration in its functioning (Roberts 2020). Economists advise us to prepare the new recession (Elliott 2020). Sociologists see worldwide border closures as an anti-globalization experiment (Peters et al. 2020), and philosophers go back to questions pertaining to human nature. Worldwide governments are responding in radically different ways—the government of Montenegro has closed down the whole country before it registered the first patient within its borders (World Health Organization 2020b), while the UK has opted for a *laissez faire* approach which is hoped to result in herd immunity (Dunn and Kahn 2020). From official news to social networks, everyone and anyone has something to contribute to these debates, creating an infodemic which will be analysed long after Covid-19 is gone.

As I write these words on 16 March 2020 from self-isolation in my flat in Zagreb, Croatia, the future of the pandemic is unclear. We have no idea what percentage of the global population will be affected by the virus, whether the virus will mutate, how many people the virus might kill, and what might happen with our politics and economy after the pandemic is gone. At this point, we need to develop immediate measures to protect ourselves individually and collectively—weed out reliable information, self-isolate, reduce panic, develop educated guesses and emergency plans. However, these urgent measures cannot arrive from thin air, and it is just as important to step back and take a birds-eye, *longue durée* view at the pandemic. While doctors, nurses, politicians, food suppliers, and many other brave people self-sacrifice to support our daily survival, this editorial argues that academics have a unique opportunity, and a moral duty, to immediately start conducting in-depth studies of current events.

Postdigital Viral Modernity

Viruses are nanoscale infectious agents (one nanometre is a billionth of one meter). Viruses do not have their own cellular structure and cannot naturally reproduce without a host cell. Yet viruses do have genes, which evolve by natural selection, and when they enter the host cell, viruses reproduce through self-assembly. Looking at different aspects of their existence, viruses can be understood both as an inanimate matter and as a form of life, and ‘the question about the origin of viruses and life itself remains for the most part a philosophical debate and largely dealt with theoretical arguments rather than molecular data, especially because viral genomic repertoires are limited and patchy’ (Nasir et al. 2012: 247–248). According to Antonio Šiber (2013), the border between non-life and life lies somewhere at the point when inanimate organic matter becomes soaked with information which enables self-replication and evolution. While it is easy to agree with Šiber’s definition, this point is hard to determine and far from agreed upon.

Viruses are within our bodies and in our environment. Over the centuries, viral pandemics such as the 1918 Spanish flu have been major biological, social, and cultural

events. Viral behaviour (and some would say viruses) can also be found beyond the organic world. Recent examples include viral Internet memes and videos, viral marketing, and computer viruses (computer programs which enter host programs, modify them, and replicate themselves). While computer viruses are clearly even further from life than biological viruses, ‘some scientists have begun to ask if computer viruses are not a form of artificial life—a self-replicating organism. Simply because computer viruses do not exist as organic molecules may not be sufficient reason to dismiss the classification of this form of “vandalware” as a form of life.’ (Spafford 1994: 249). This argument sits well with a growing number of posthumanist critiques, which suggest that what we should accept as life is largely ‘a normative not a descriptive category’ (Fuller and Jandrić 2019: 207).

Covid-19 is an organic virus which has caused various sorts of organic and non-organic viral behaviours in all spheres of (human) biology, culture, and society. The interplay of these behaviours can be approached through the lens of Michael Peters’ viral modernity, which is ‘a concept that is based upon the nature of viruses, the ancient and critical role they play in evolution and culture, and the basic application to understanding the role of information and forms of bioinformation in the social world’ (Peters et al. 2020). Viral diseases have always been intrinsic to human existence. Every age has its own viral modernity, and the Covid-19 pandemic is merely the first global exercise of viral modernity in our ‘hard to define; messy; unpredictable; digital and analog; technological and non-technological; biological and informational’ postdigital reality (Jandrić et al. 2018: 895). These days, we can speak of viral education (exemplified in a current global switch to online education), viral post-truth (exemplified in a global Covid-19 infodemic), viral open science (exemplified in exponential growth of open science and associated publications) (see Peters et al. 2020), and so on. Writing these words from home isolation in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is hard not to overstate the viral nature of, and viral perspective to, our postdigital reality. While the exact relationships between viral modernity and postdigital reality will need to be soberly examined after the heat of the moment is gone, there is no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic is an extreme postdigital ‘rupture and continuation event’ (Jandrić et al. 2018: 895), and that this event will significantly influence the way we see and experience the world in the foreseeable future.

What Is to Be Done?

Writing these words at the beginning of the global community outbreak phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, I am painfully aware of their ephemeral nature. Hopefully, the pandemic could soon wind down; yet it is just as possible that we might be heading towards a large-scale disaster or towards anything in the between. And yet, most of us cannot do much at this stage. Being in self-isolation, my ‘research’ of Covid-19 consists of cooking nice meals, cleaning my flat, endless consummation of the infodemic, frantic exchange of emails with friends all over the globe, and feeble attempts to make sense of what happens. Unsurprisingly, that involves a lot of trivia and a bit of humour. Reading semi-serious, semi-bitter, semi-hopeful ‘predictions’ of a possible baby-boom nine months after introduction of a curfew in Italy, Austria, and Spain, my first instinct was to think of all those academics now sitting at home. Those

of us who teach are now dealing with the complexities of online education, and many of us will also try and catch up with writing that one paper that has always hovered at the bottom of our to-do lists. In the sea of Covid-19-related speculations, the only prediction I would put my money on is an increased number of paper submissions to academic journals in the months to come.

Researchers in some areas of medical sciences, biology, economy, logistics, and others, can help people directly affected by the pandemic through the development of diagnostic tools, medicines, and vaccinations; analysing counter-recession measures; increasing efficiency of shipping food and medicine; and the like. However, what happens to people who have not been infected by Covid-19 but have lost their jobs, cannot pay their mortgages, or have become homeless due to economic slowdown? What happens to the most vulnerable members of the society - children, elderly, disabled, those with mental issues? How many indirect victims will the Covid-19 pandemic create? In our context of advanced global capitalism, what should be done to spread the burden of the pandemic at least a bit more equally? And which consequences will the Covid-19 pandemic have in regards to the environment, surveillance, worldwide rise of fascism, democracy? Postdigital viral modernity is equally about biology, culture, and society; in the long run, humanity cannot defend itself from Covid-19 and create a better future without engaging all strata of the society. Therefore, it is crucial that academic researchers working in the humanities and social sciences immediately join the struggle against the pandemic. In the postdigital context of viral modernity, decades of training and experience in any academic field can contribute to making sense of the crisis. Postdigital researchers should read, research, and write about all imaginable aspects of Covid-19!—even if that research, at present, does not seem to offer much help in getting us through and over the pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought a huge social experiment into our homes, streets, cities, countries, and globally. Outcomes of this social experiment will follow the whole humankind, probably fairly unequally, far into the future. As I write these words, nurses and doctors undertake huge health risks to support our wellbeing. Supermarket tellers undertake similar health risks, but receive much less praise, to bring supplies to people who are not (or will not be) allowed to leave their houses. Teachers work nights and weekends to develop learning materials and support their online students. People working in many other occupations, pensioners, children, and many others, need to stay at home, watch the news, and follow instructions. None of these roles is less important than the other. While we obviously need food, healthcare, and education, the virus can be contained only through discipline and solidarity of all strata of the society.

The humanities and social sciences are already making significant contributions in areas such as informing citizens, prevention of panic, big data analysis, open science, and others. For instance, UK's Wellcome Trust statement, 'Sharing research data and findings relevant to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak' (Wellcome Trust 2020) has enabled unprecedented levels of sharing Covid-19-related information which have already significantly contributed to development of diagnostic tools, medical procedures, and vaccines (see Peters et al. 2020). While we struggle against immediate threats, however, we should also keep in mind the broader picture. Other areas of the humanities and social sciences, which may now seem unrelated to our immediate struggle against the pandemic, are not less crucial for long-term flourishing of the human race.

We, postdigital scholars working in the humanities and social sciences, should not take our home isolations and quarantines as unexpected vacations or opportunities to catch up with old projects. Instead, we should look into the strengths of our disciplinary knowledges and research methods to try and create opportunities to contribute to humanity's collective struggle against the Covid-19 pandemic and point towards more sustainable futures. Some of our current insights will be hasted, and will serve as mere first-hand testimonies for later (and more balanced) research. Some of our insights will be picked up only in the next pandemic. Some of our insights will be plainly wrong, and consequently retracted. In our current infodemic, the most of our current produce will probably simply remain overlooked and unread. Yet some of our insights may raise awareness of important issues, add more nuance to our thinking, and perhaps even influence the course of the pandemic. It is impossible to know which piece of research will end up in the garbage bin of history, which piece of research will make a difference, and when that difference may surface. Anne Frank's diary did absolutely nothing to stop the Second World War, and poor Anne had not lived long enough to even see it published. Yet seventy years later, Anne Frank's diary still makes a huge service to humanity by providing a constant reminder of the perils of fascism.

Wearing my academic researcher hat, I am not ashamed of naivety of this paper—it honestly represents my current thoughts and feelings about the Covid-19 pandemic on 16 March 2020. These thoughts are likely to be overridden by new developments, but they will nevertheless serve as a testimony of this historical moment. Wearing my academic editor hat, I am not afraid of publishing papers that might be proven wrong or even retracted—messy and unpredictable postdigital challenges pertaining to viral modernity require messy and unpredictable attempts at answering. Wearing my Daddy hat, I am admittedly a bit ashamed of withdrawing into the world of research while my son lives through some of the most challenging times in his 6-year-old life. Yet beneath all these hats, there is a head; in this head, there is a mind; and in this mind, there is a tiny, persistent voice that whispers: knowledge and solidarity are the key to long-term survival and flourishing of the human race. I invite all postdigital scholars to take this very seriously, get out of our comfort zones, and explore all imaginable aspects of this large social experiment that the Covid-19 pandemic has lain down in front of us. In the midst of the pandemic, many of these efforts may seem useless. Yet paraphrasing John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1966), those who dare to fail miserably are also those who might change the course of history.

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