



## Review of Sarah Hayes (2021). *Postdigital Positionality: Developing Powerful Inclusive Narratives for Learning, Teaching, Research and Policy in Higher Education*

Leiden: Brill. 366 pp. ISBN 9789004466029 (E-book)

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### Attending to the Virtual Laundry in a Pandemic

This academic book begins in an unexpected yet entirely appropriate place—Sarah Hayes’ airing cupboard. It works well as a metaphor for airing different viewpoints on education and inclusivity in a largely hidden space (the Internet) where we may be tempted to pull out the well-worn items that are easy to reach. A photo of the airing cupboard reminds us of the problems of not seeing what we have shoved to the back of our consciousness. The idiom of airing one’s dirty linen in public is also relevant and recognizable for our tense current social climate. Materially too, the humble airing cupboard is significant for the themes of the book; Hayes occasionally reminds us that its plumbed-in functions can now be connected and controlled through the Internet of Things. The combination of technological and biological processes in the airing cupboard is not simply an analogy, although it works well for that. The airing cupboard is itself an example of the physicality underpinning our contemporary cultural, technological and biological practices. As with the Internet, the physical infrastructure can go unnoticed along with any algorithms and other invisible mechanisms that sustain those practices, and this theme recurs throughout the book.

For those unfamiliar with airing cupboards, the concept is defined in a useful glossary that also contains definitions of the book’s title, *Postdigital Positionality*, and its constituent words. The title suggests an appeal to a specific readership who would understand its reference to two previously unconnected theoretical perspectives. However, it is pleasing to imagine that a wider audience might also benefit from the book’s insights into what happens now that digital technology is an integral and inseparable aspect of life (the postdigital perspective), and the impact this has

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on our identities and inclusion in social and political contexts (positionality). This is a complex book because of the interweaving of all the factors that affect our ability to develop ‘powerful inclusive narratives for learning, teaching, research and policy in Higher Education’ (Hayes 2021). However, the arguments unfold with clarity, rigour, empathy, and the lightness of touch suggested by the initial metaphor even as we grasp its serious import. I was very grateful for each chapter’s overview of headings as a way of orientating the reader to the arguments that follow. Similarly, the summary of the book at the end of the introduction is an invaluable advance organizer.

The book was written at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has amplified and refracted its line of reasoning, again with both metaphorical and material effects. Sarah Hayes is one of a number of scholars currently exploring the interrelationship of viral biology and information science with implications for our social, economic and political discourses and the technological practices that merge with biological ones (see, for example, Peters et al. 2021). These interests become manifest during the book, creating possibly demanding but also exciting topics for new readers. Hayes has an unusual advantage, however. All readers will recognise recent contexts exposing social inequality: the pandemic, cancel culture, identity politics. They’ll also be aware of the contemporary reliance on data: measurement and ‘datafication’ of almost everything we do, with standardised data sometimes demonstrably likely to embody biases. For Hayes, the pandemic has helped to reveal some of the injustices previously concealed in neoliberal policies and practices. Biology, technology and culture are inextricably linked in failures of social justice and the author is in a strong position at this time to point out how.

As well as metaphor and analogy, Sarah Hayes provides plenty of examples to aid understanding, and the spotlight of Covid-19 ensures that these are recognisable to most potential readers. In the virtual airing cupboard of the Internet during the pandemic, many facts and opinions have been shared, have gone viral, become data, been misinterpreted and aggregated, judged and even ‘cancelled’. This has become a process of tracking and creating mutations of Covid-19 and other narratives, uncannily similar to what has happened with the virus itself. Also coming to light are the stark differentiations between the haves and have-nots in the pandemic: the access to devices and bandwidth for education or working at home, the policies that privilege the already-privileged, and the inequalities in financial, social, health and educational outcomes of responses to lockdown and disease. In the UK, all of these came to a head when algorithms determined the qualifications of young people leaving school during the pandemic, as proxies for their expected exam results (a situation referred to several times and critically analysed in Chapter 3). Problems have thus been exposed that have long been present, but now we have all been given an uncomfortable glimpse of the impact of lack of inclusivity in our global societies with potential effects on everyone’s health, opportunities and freedoms. The communal experience of the pandemic is seized by Hayes as an opportunity to recognize and resist inequalities as we move forward from it.

## Who Connects with Whom... and What?

The metaphors, personal experience, examples and images in the preface and introduction make the scene-setting longer than usual, but to good effect. Postdigital inclusivity will require attention to the technological ‘plumbing’ of the Internet and our institutions, and to those who may be connecting with the plumbing and instituting control, as well as the risks of *not* connecting some people, activities and objects. As Hayes unpacks the context within which the contemporary university has to operate, she illustrates how discourse about the pandemic is aggravating and disrupting the ‘McDonaldisation’ (Ritzer 1993) of language and policy that she has discussed in an earlier book (Hayes 2019). The tendency to assume that all institutions should operate in the same way as a popular fast-food restaurant will, unfortunately, be immediately recognizable to those who work in universities.

Perhaps, though, the impact on inclusivity policy has been overlooked in this recognition, and Hayes’ major contribution with this book is to draw our attention to the need to attend to inclusivity policies *and* to their current separation from policies on ‘technology enhanced learning’. When McPolicy<sup>1</sup> statements on inclusivity attribute it to ‘strategy’ or ‘the university’, the policy’s anonymous authors conceal all human agency and responses within situations in the university and beyond. This results in bland assurances, for example that inclusivity is fully embedded in strategy: a complacent attitude that still cannot really be attributed to anyone because of the way it is written. Hayes’ earlier work, pre-pandemic (Hayes 2019), is thus an important part of her argument here. If we continue with the policy-making she saw then, the ‘new normal’ after the pandemic will probably exacerbate existing inequalities, bringing in new forms of exclusion, and it may also leave the door open to ruthless commercial exploitation of higher education. If we are not careful, the McPolicy-associated ‘algorithmic identities’ of academics and their students may be all that our virtual airing cupboard can sustain, unless we can find an alternative postdigital positionality that incorporates a perspective on inclusivity and ensures that all our voices are actually heard.

## Resistance, Agency and Choice in Inclusive Practice

I have been using ‘our’ and ‘we’ a great deal throughout this review: we are the readers, but we are also the objects or possibly the subjects of what is going on in the conflux of biology, technology and culture. Sarah Hayes makes it very clear (especially in Chapter 1) that we do have still have agency: we can choose our positionalities rather than have them chosen for us by machines acting as our proxies. For this to happen, the choices about postdigital positionality should be personal, collective and inclusive. It is in this first chapter that the importance of the book’s

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<sup>1</sup> Book’s glossary: ‘McPolicy discourse is characterised by strong patterns of repetition of HE policy statements, where technologies, strategies and other objects are attributed with human labour.’ (Hayes 2021: 5)

title is clearly established. Postdigital positionality provides an alternative to the discourse of rationality and objectivity that pervades higher education policy, including that on inclusivity. Hayes encourages us to resist the static and impersonal status quo behind claims of ‘well-established inclusivity practices’ that can be audited through processes more suitable for industrial or fast-food environments.

Chapter 2, while expanding on this theme of resistance, also shows us what we are up against. The introduction to the chapter draws attention to the extensive plumbing (and its ownership) that underpins the Internet, our technology and our systems in the contemporary neoliberal political economy. The chapter establishes the damage done by the separation of university policies on inclusivity and technology, with the latter mainly having a narrow and instrumental data-driven focus. There are many possible areas to ‘air’ in a book review, and some of them are quite alarming as we hurtle from a pandemic to a new normal which feels beyond our control. I am keen, though, to highlight Chapter 2’s most positive aspect and key message.

As in Chapter 1, Hayes stresses that we still have choices. Our debates around postdigital positionality can counter the negative forces we suspect are engulfing us. We can (and should) incorporate the likely effects of data-driven technologies in our policy discussions, including policy on inclusivity. Many of the architects of these ‘plumbed-in’ technologies are still around and can be useful allies in resistance to inequalities wrought through appropriation of their inventions in universities and beyond. The Internet can be a virtual airing cupboard as much as it can be a virtual shopping mall. Hayes reminds of this by concluding the chapter with a re-imagination of both airing cupboards and HE policy as ‘living literacies’ where dynamic and reflexive interactions between people, activities and technologies are acknowledged, along with their effects.

## **Postdigital Positionality in Learning, Teaching, Research and Leadership**

The second half of the book takes a closer look at different postdigital positionalities in HE, continuing the themes of resistance and re-imagination in a world where policies on technology and inclusivity are not kept apart. The chapters on the postdigital positionality of the learner, teacher and the researcher have been well set-up by the earlier part of the book. Some of the damaging buzzwords from McPolicy are ruthlessly dispatched: respectively, ‘the student experience’, ‘teaching excellence’ and ‘research impact’. Hayes demonstrates very effectively how such vacuous expressions are inadequate for the complex identities, purposes and practices of HE—and indeed how they conceal the lack of inclusivity. In each of these chapters, we are encouraged to consider damage caused by instrumentalism, over-emphasis on markets, and separation of policies, as well as what has been exposed by the pandemic. But each leaves the reader with the feeling that the buzzword has had its day and more appropriate futures can be imagined and discussed without being exclusionary.

Chapter 6 has some tricky issues to consider: when policy statements disguise agency, how can postdigital positionality affect ‘the university’ and its leadership and policy-making? The pandemic has revealed many problems about HE as

well as other institutions, some of which have been aired at length in the virtual airing cupboard. Equally, the pandemic's legacy is that things will clearly have to change: any sanitised and standardised accounts of 'the student experience' especially are negated by scenes of distressed students on television news. Academics are researching and writing about the impact of the pandemic on a wide-range of practices, including their own, with many strong examples appearing in this very journal. What the pandemic has revealed cannot be pushed to the back of the airing cupboard.

The final chapter has a single subheading: a powerful message to end on. 'When biological environments change social arrangements need to alter too.' (Hayes 2021: 298) The pandemic has uncovered disturbing implications of this for both the humanities and computing and their related fields; the need to work together is paramount. There are other global imperatives ahead. We shall need to be clear about our individual and collective postdigital positionalities.

A short review of such a complex book feels as though it is merely skimming the surface. I find something different demands my attention on each visit to the book; this is because it ties in so closely to recent experiences and thinking. Perhaps the most important message for this review is to encourage readers to explore the book itself, with a reflexive eye on the relevance of its examples, metaphors and theories to existing experience and possible futures. For Sarah Hayes that future can be a positive one, and particularly an inclusive one. We can together develop those powerful inclusive narratives.

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