# Review of Petar Jandrić, Alison MacKenzie, and Jeremy Knox (Eds.). (2023). *Constructing Postdigital Research: Method and Emancipation*

## Cham: Springer. 387 pp. ISBN 9783031354106 (Hardcover)

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## Taking a Postdigital Position

*Constructing Postdigital Research: Method and Emancipation* (Jandrić et al. 2023a) is the second edited volume in the Postdigital Science and Education book series[1] focused on postdigital research. Complementing *Postdigital Research: Genealogies, Challenges, and Future Perspectives* (Jandrić et al. 2023b, for a review see Büchner 2023), this volume presents the many ways to construct, conduct, and reflect on critical and emancipatory postdigital research.

The book's goal is not 'to define what postdigital research is, how postdigital research should be done' (Jandrić 2023a: xviii), or limit what exactly postdigital means or is supposed to mean. It also cannot be further from a methodological step-by-step guide. The shared spirit of critical research gathered in this book is to balance and to *hold the postdigital in abeyance* to utilize 'the power of the messy and open idea of "the postdigital"' (Hayes 2023: 4), in order to confront the urgent challenges in our unequal, messy, data-driven societies beyond disciplinary boundaries.

Inspired by the book, I begin this review with my own positionality statement. I am an emerging researcher from Germany in the field of educational sciences. My

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[1] See https://www.springer.com/series/16439. Accessed 27 September 2023.

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journey with the postdigital started in 2020, when I began my PhD in a participatory and design-oriented project centered around fablabs as educational spaces in collaboration with schools[2]. At the time, the pandemic dominated the global stage, vividly illustrating the postdigital nature of our current condition and increasing inequalities (see Jandrić et al. 2021; Kuhn et al. 2023). For more than 1.5 years, I found myself in a postdigital – and somehow also dystopic – world of home office and constant Zoom meetings, all the while juggling my daughter's homeschooling. I learned about the postdigital, joined the 'Postdigital Education' research team at our institute as well as LeibnizScienceCampus 'Postdigital Participation'[3] and its PhD group.

Members of this group, arriving from diverse disciplines such as social sciences, media studies, computer science, social work, and architecture, engaged in lively discussions about the meanings and interpretations of 'postdigital' and 'participation' – another concept which is often held in abeyance. For the first time, I experienced the essence of the postdigital spirit – bringing people together across borders and disciplines to engage in constructive, sometimes controversial discussions, and collectively advance research interests and processes. However, for emerging researchers like me, the 'postdigital' was a multifaceted, challenging concept, that led to many frustrating, but also inspiring moments.

The 'postdigital' remained a constant companion throughout my PhD journey. In a reading group, we discussed various texts from *Postdigital Science and Education*. I participated in conversations and discussions at the 'Postdigital Lunch' lecture series (see Lüpkes 2020). In May 2023, I finally had the opportunity to meet many researchers from the Postdigital Science and Education community during a conference in Braunschweig[4], which I co-organized with colleagues from the Campus. Particularly during our preparation of a joint panel presentation titled 'Postdigitality – So What?!', I was engaged in extensive discussions about the challenges associated with the fluidity and elusive definitions of the postdigital. As I write these words, my postdigital journey continues.

## Postdigital Positionality: Critically Reflecting on our Researcher Selves

When I read the first part of the book, I was immediately reminded of Donna Haraway's (1988) concept of situated knowledges. We perceive, interpret, speak, and act from specific societal positions, within the horizon of distinct experiences, worldviews, memories, cultural norms and values. Knowledge, insights, and perspectives are always situated and embodied; historically, culturally, socially, and disciplinarily. To generate truly meaningful research that prompts us to question and reflect on our-

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[2] See https://www.gei.de/en/research/projects/fabulous-supporting-schools-by-teaching-and-learning-in-fablabs and https://fabulous.uni-bremen.de/. Accessed 5 October 2023.

[3] See https://www.postdigitalparticipation.org/en/. Accessed 5 October 2023.

[4] The 'Participation and the Postdigital. Contemporary technologies and practices in education and urban life' conference was held on 4–5 May 2023 in Braunschweig, Germany. The conference was organized by the Leibniz ScienceCampus – Postdigital Participation – Braunschweig. See https://www.postdigitalparticipation.org/ausblick/konferenz. Accessed 27 September 2023.

selves and our (pre)conceptions, these aspects need to be made explicit and transparent. In the spirit of this critical (and feminist) understanding of science, *Constructing Postdigital Research* (Jandrić et al. 2023a) offers concrete, applicable methods and questions for reflection.

Since Haraway's situated knowledges (1988) and in today's messy postdigital condition (Jandrić et al. 2018), researchers' 'honest, critically reflexive expressions of their positionality' is needed 'as a way to turn things "inside out", surfacing what is often unseen and unheard throughout the joy and anguish of research' (Hayes 2023: 3). In a similar spirit, Nicola Pallitt and Neil Kramm (2023) 'see engaging with our positionalities as part of decolonising the Educational Technology field' (24), expand the scope of possible postdigital positionings, and emphasize the posthumanist perspective and more-than-human. And Mel M. Engman et al. (2023) suggest metaphorical, hand-drawn, 'ludic' (55) 'postdigital mapping exercises that center experiential knowledge, play, memory, and representation' (52) as a way to engage with our academic postdigital positionalities.

Positioning 'as an ongoing process' (Hayes 2023: 6) and an important research practice appears essential to become aware of our own perspectives and how they can influence our perception and interpretation. Our (postdigital) positions - our own preconceptions, biases, and so forth - influences, for instance, how we analyze and interpret collected data, what conclusions we draw and what insights we generate, as well as how we wish to share them with others. To draw on Haraway (2016) once again: 'It matters …what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots' (12). Indeed, postdigital positionality is important both for understanding research findings and for their critical assessment.

## Constructing Postdigital Research: Generating Knowledge in Postdigital Spaces

The second part of the book is about the ontological, epistemological, and methodological issues pertaining to postdigital research. Peter Goodyear et al. (2023) delve into the interdisciplinary construction of 'locally-useful' (66) (design) knowledge in two interdisciplinary research centers through a postcritical stance. Anastasia O. Tzirides et al. (2023) also center their discussion on design and knowledge and present a 'Cyber-social research' model aimed at 'assessing the impact of digital technology on educational practices' (92). The researchers outline the methodological foundation of their model and emphasize three key aspects for both participants and outcomes of postdigital research: participation, inclusion, and diversity.

James Lamb focuses on 'the relationship between sociomateriality and postdigital thinking, explored through the growing body of research around the learning spaces of higher education' (Lamb 2023: 103). In this regard, he comprehensively describes the underlying (key) assumptions and conceptualizations and analyzes empirical examples. He asks – and I have also asked the same question many times - how a postdigital lens, as a form of research sensibility, is connected to, but also goes beyond, sociomaterial approaches in driving 'our research into making sense of the

presence and influence of digital technologies' (121) and 'to reflect on our researcher-selves' (116) and positions.

Lamb's chapter deeply resonates with my own research, and I can imagine that his reflections could be particularly useful for other emerging researchers who aspire to conduct research in postdigital (educational) spaces or from a postdigital perspective. As argued by Jacob Davidsen et al. (2023), 'researching learning in the age of post-digital circumstances is a complex task' (119). Adding 'interactional and volumetric scenographies' (126) to this complexity, they aim to emancipate 'the researcher from being a spectator of abstract data to a participant that can inhabit and reactivate the data immersively' (126).

This powerful idea applies well beyond virtual reality and also goes in line with the other considerations in the second part, as postdigital research and the construction of knowledge in postdigital space can never be separated from the researcher (and/or other participants).

## Postdigital Data and Algorithms: The Datafication of Education

By the third part of the volume, the critical dimension of the book has become clear(er). Postdigital research never stops at critical analysis or the identification of problems; crucially, is always about developing hopeful alternatives.

Paul Prinsloo (2023) draws on the increasing 'measurement' of education and the proliferation of data brokers and learning platform providers to explore 'postdigital learning analytics' (141). He advocates for recognizing the 'flesh-electric' (139), which signifies the interconnectedness of digital data with other human and non-human (f)actors. I am left questioning how the other types of data, proposed by Prinsloo, might be included into learning (analytics) processes and what structures we might need to enable their inclusion.

Velislava Hillman (2023) critically analyzes today's 'postdigital education eco-system' (159), its technodeterministic foundations, and its increasing domination by 'data-intensive algorithmic systems' (160). On that basis, she criticizes EdTech companies as the 'new pedagogic authority' (160). Her chapter taught me a lot about the datafication of our postdigital educational systems and the political and change-oriented dimension of postdigital research. To move away from the pessimistic view of current postdigital education in the context of EdTech companies, Hillman (2023) calls for systematic postdigital research concerning social-ethical and structural concerns related to EdTech futures. She emphasizes the need for governance and policies for EdTech companies, to ensure that they are 'held accountable for any risks their products may incur' (167). What an important concern!

Greta Goetz (2023) focuses on the negotiation of 'computational "intelligence"' (183) within the 'evolving network of learning and research' (183) and asks: '[W]hat it means to know' (187) in 'the postdigital age of Artificial Intelligence (AI)' (183)? For scholars like me, who, for instance, used ChatGPT while reading the book to explain the meaning of English words I didn't know, reading this chapter leads to reflection. Considering the speed and extent of ChatGPT's global spread worldwide since its release, how many other AI applications are currently spreading without

attracting any public attention? What are the consequences of their use? And what should postdigital researchers do about them?

The chapters in this part are, partly, quite dense and complexly written – I had to read certain sections multiple times to fully grasp them. However, without a doubt, this effort is worthwhile, as all chapters engage with the growing algorithmization and datafication of our educational systems. This appears particularly relevant to me, as the perceptions and biases inscribed into these algorithmic and data-driven EdTech systems also shape and constitute the practices within the educational contexts that I, as an educational researcher, am eager to explore and analyse – often without being visible to the participants (or even to myself as a researcher). Bringing these often invisible, biased background structures and systems to the forefront is a challenging and complex task, but also a rewarding and significant one!

## Exclusions and Inclusions: Dealing with Validity and Human Rights in the Postdigital Condition

The fourth part of the volume strongly emphasizes social and (post-)digital inequalities; mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion within the postdigital condition. The chapters emerge from various disciplines and perspectives, each with its distinct focus, highlighting 'the postdigital's notorious resistance to definition and disciplinary refusal (Jandrić and Ford 2022; MacKenzie 2022)' (Hanna 2023: 259–260). Here, the 'blurring of distinctions at the heart of postdigital research' (Macgilchrist 2023: 214) becomes particularly evident.

Felicitas Macgilchrist (2023) examines the entanglement of 'validity' and 'modernity' by analyzing three distinct peer review processes of papers originating from different research projects that employed various inventive methods (see Poltze et al. 2022 for one example). Macgilchrist (2023) emphasizes the importance of generating new insights that are accepted as 'valid' by fellow scholars in social science research. She proposes a *postdigital validity* that is 'enacted as a blurring of clear boundaries, binaries, and demarcations' (222). This resonates with PhD students like me; students (who want to) do critical postdigital educational research and will then have to 'defend' their theses. I work within the German Educational Science System, which is strongly dominated by 'classical' quantitative or qualitative methodologies; the concept of *postdigital validity* offers many points of reference and assurance that my work will be appropriately assessed and recognized. Beyond this personal point of reference, I imagine that postdigital validity will be important in many different contexts.

Selman Özdan (2023: 231) focuses on 'the protection of human rights in the age of AI' from a legal perspective. He describes human relationships with technologies 'in the postdigital and posthuman period' before focusing on potential harms of AI in the area of human rights. Özdan also explores alternative ways to protect these rights and asks which 'steps should be taken in this regard, reminding the need for an international consensus on AI' (246). In this chapter, the utility of a postdigital lens – as opposed to a posthuman theoretical lens – is not entirely clear. Yet, the chapter is an

example and reminder of all the different aspects - in this case, national and international legal aspects - that shape our relationships with technologies.

Amy Hanna (2023) also explores human rights, specifically children's participation rights in postdigital research. She uses the postdigital 'as a lens for troubling the dichotomy of "digital" and "analog" (Cramer in Cramer and Jandrić 2021: 985) alongside the "voiced" and the "silent" in the lives of children, and in particular with regard to their access to, and sharing of, information' (252). Countering notions that position children as non-knowers and exclude them, Hanna develops 'a Rights-Based Postdigital Epistemology of Silence' (259), with which she advocates for a stronger, participatory involvement of children in postdigital research 'in order to share their perspectives on the postdigital challenges we all face' (267). In my view, Hanna's (2023) chapter serves as a compelling example of how embracing the ambiguity and fluidity, emphasizing the 'the postdigital's troubling of dichotomies' (264) and its boundary-blurring nature, can be constructively applied to one's own research (subject).

These chapters build on empirical examples to focus on the mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion within the postdigital condition. Who is included/excluded; how and why? What further connects this section and adds significant value for an emerging researcher is a notable emphasis on alternative approaches, pathways, and methods aimed at constructing powerful and critical research oriented towards disruptive, empowering, and hopeful forms of change. Which systemic changes do we need to create a more just future? And which concrete actions do they require?

## Method and Emancipation: Transforming the Future?

The last part of the book is focused on critical, transformative, participatory, and creative methods to analyze various inequalities and power structures within the postdigital condition.

Allison MacKenzie (2023: 277) describes 'the harms that are facilitated, disseminated, or aggravated by ICT, the Internet, and Big Tech'. Because 'the postdigital condition offers infinite variety for patriarchy to keep its structures of power and privilege intact' (288), she uses 'postdigital feminist analysis' as a method 'to expose, scrutinise and challenge very bad old habits in very modern digital environments' (291). If we want women – and of course also all other persons, apart from a binary understanding of gender - to act in an emancipated way in the postdigital society, we must analyze and name such harms, violences, and mechanisms of inequality. MacKenzie's (2023) chapter is a powerful example of postdigital emancipatory research, and its importance reaches well beyond the immediate topic of her critique.

Maginess et al. (2023) also emphasize the importance of women having a voice that is heard, and the need for empowerment and emancipation through postdigital research. This chapter's method of choice is participatory and arts-based postdigital research, where women took part as co-researchers 'to empower themselves through an inherently dialogic co-learning and co-research process' (296) and 'building a postdigital community of practice with an empowering and inclusive ethos' (298).

Juha Suoranta and Marko Teräs (2023: 321) suggest 'Future Workshops' as a collaborative and imaginative, participatory research method with 'the aim of democratization'. Reading this chapter reminds that a mere examination of existing ideas is far from enough. Because 'the future is not a prediction question but of making' (324), we need to envision alternative (future) designs in collaboration with the people affected by them. This is often challenging. Yet the text offers a concrete, emancipatory method, which I find very useful for facilitating critical postdigital dialogue in various contexts.

The concluding chapter for the volume serves as another compelling example of how the complex issues of our time demand examination across disciplinary and theoretical boundaries - all the while, contending with ontological and epistemological questions. Postdigital research, it seems, can act as an 'umbrella' for such endeavors. One way to encompass the theoretical lenses and perspectives necessary to understand complex phenomena, according to Kuhn et al. (2023), is a 'Theoretical Kaleidoscope'. This multi-authored chapter provides a useful toolkit for researchers, utilizing the powerful 'metaphor of a kaleidoscope to describe the need for different theories … to unpack and understand the complexity of digital inequality' (336) and 'to diagnose different aspects of what is wrong and why' (335).

We find ourselves in a challenging time, facing seemingly insurmountable issues such as the escalating climate crisis, which is growing more severe with each passing year. Reflecting on the (immediate and distant) future is crucial for all of us who strive to shape a more equitable and livable future. Think, for instance, of political climate protest movements like Fridays for Future[5] and The Last Generation[6] in Germany. For us, as researchers, it is not enough to merely analyze what is happening; we have a responsibility to change things for the better. Laudably, it appears to be a central task of postdigital research! Alternative visions and designs for the future are hugely important – and I am especially enamored by the chapters that develop concrete methodologies towards their development and application.

## Holding the Postdigital in Abeyance and Hopeful Critique

What binds *Constructing Postdigital Research: Method and Emancipation* (Jandrić et al. 2023a), together with *Postdigital Research: Genealogies, Challenges, and Future Perspectives* (Jandrić et al. 2023b; see Büchner 2023), is the spirit of *holding the postdigital in abeyance*; the emphasis on fluid, boundary-blurring, and connective nature of the concept of the postdigital and its community; and the need to use these constructively in critical and emancipatory postdigital research practice. As Hanna (2023: 259) aptly formulates, 'the problems we face in society in the twenty-first century cannot be tackled through single disciplines, stakeholders, or sectors'. Chapters within *Constructing Postdigital Research* (Jandrić et al. 2023a) take different approaches. Some invite us on a reflective journey into our own postdigital research processes; others tell stories emerging from their authors' research processes; and yet

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[5] See https://fridaysforfuture.org/. Accessed 5 October 2023.

[6] See https://www.last-generation.org/. Accessed 5 October 2023.

others suggest methods that can be adapted to enhance our own critical postdigital research practices.

An important point of convergence for this volume is a spirit of *hopeful critique*. All chapters use postdigital theoretical lenses to critically reflect on current challenges. Yet they don't stop there; instead, they reach beyond and offer alternative possibilities and hopeful visions for the future. In postdigital research 'there is an ongoing interchange between what is to come, as well as what has gone before' (Hayes 2023: 3). This perspective on doing (social science) research in our challenging, messy postdigital condition is a powerful strength of the book.

Admittedly, the volume is densely written, featuring numerous theoretical lenses, approaches, and a diverse range of subjects across various contexts – which, during my reading, sometimes led to small moments of despair. *Holding the postdigital in abeyance* is challenging, yet it encourages researchers to apply the postdigital constructively within our research practice, reflect on our researcher selves, and develop hopeful alternatives, (future) designs, and pathways for change. *Constructing Postdigital Research: Method and Emancipation* (Jandrić et al. 2023a), in conjunction with *Postdigital Research: Genealogies, Challenges, and Future Perspectives* (Jandrić et al. 2023b), is a highly valuable contribution to advancing the 'postdigital dialogue' (Jandrić et al. 2019) and to managing the messiness of postdigital research practice.

This book helped me to grasp the multifaceted and boundary blurring nature of postdigital research and perceive the ambiguity and fluidity inherent in postdigital practices. While these issues are especially relevant for emerging researchers and those new to the postdigital perspective, I imagine that the book will also be useful for advanced scholars seeking to improve and critically reflect on their research practice. *Constructing Postdigital Research: Method and Emancipation* (Jandrić et al. 2023a) may lead to liberating moments, prompting a departure from disciplinary and methodological confines and boundaries, thereby enabling genuinely critical and emancipatory research within the complex, messy postdigital conditions of our times.

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