



The Day After Covid-19

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Down into the Rabbit Hole

Nine months ago, on 31 December 2019, the World Health Organization (2020) reported the first official case of ‘pneumonia of unknown cause’ in Wuhan. As the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) embarked on its journey around the world, it took less than 80 days to wreak global havoc. Already in March, daily news reports were bursting with numbers of infected and deceased, and social networks were overflowing with conspiracy theories (Fuller 2020; Rose 2020; McLaren 2020). Many countries were in or near massive lockdowns, those still unaffected closed down their borders, and a stubborn minority counted the dead and prayed for the miracle of herd immunity. The world had entered into uncharted waters, and it is still unknown which of many employed strategies will yield best results in the long run (Gibney 2020).

The medical community immediately poured all available resources into researching the coronavirus, and social sciences, humanities, and the arts joined within less than a couple of months (Jandrić 2020a). Academic publishers gave up their revenue and offered open access to all Covid-19-related scholarly articles free of charge (Wellcome Trust 2020). Celebrity academics published their first books on the pandemic (Žižek 2020; see Whitcomb 2020); Fang Fang’s *Wuhan Diary: Dispatches from a Quarantined City* (2020) has sparked huge debates and rabid attempts at censorship (Jandrić 2020b; Yan 2020). While the so-called essential workers tirelessly and selflessly labored against the unknown threat to provide the rest of us with food, electricity, medical services, education, and everything else that comprises modern life, researchers

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of all shapes and hues have devoted all the energy they could muster to try and make sense of what happens to humankind.

On 21 March 2020, *Postdigital Science and Education* joined these efforts following my editorial ‘Postdigital Research in the Time of Covid-19’ and the call for papers which invited the community to ‘explore all imaginable aspects of this large social experiment that the Covid-19 pandemic has lain down in front of us’ (Jandrić 2020a: 237). For better or worse, I remembered words that McKenzie Wark told me a few years back: ‘the first challenge for education is to think how to even describe the more abstract contours of the present in a way that is neither old wine in new bottles nor new wine in old bottles’ (in Jandrić 2017: 115). Inspired by these words, and following my long-term obsession with transdisciplinarity (see Jandrić and Hayes 2020a), I issued a hectic, messy call for literally all kinds of contributions: short 500-word testimonies, longer commentary articles, even longer original articles, book reviews, photographs, and what not.

My call may have been messy, but these messy words reflect a very clear idea. In our mission statement article for the journal, editors of *Postdigital Science and Education* wrote:

The postdigital is hard to define; messy; unpredictable; digital and analog; technological and non-technological; biological and informational. The postdigital is both a rupture in our existing theories and their continuation. However, such messiness seems to be inherent to the contemporary human condition. (Jandrić et al. 2018: 895)

Born within a postdigital world, the Covid-19 pandemic requires postdigital research approaches—and this call for papers is an attempt to put our theories into editing practice. I recently received an email by Krista Galyen, who beautifully summarized this research agenda sensing my ideas behind this issue: ‘Knowledge is created and shared through so many ways, both sharing what worked, what did not work, through books, through experiences, through talking to people and sharpening one’s ideas. Without peeking through all the different types of “reality tunnels,” your view becomes skewed.’¹

This issue of *Postdigital Science and Education* is aimed at opening up as many ‘reality tunnels’ as reasonably possible within the traditional structure of academic publishing. While each and every contribution was accepted based on its own contribution to our understanding of the Covid-19 pandemic, our theory implies that a synergy between the contributions should make this collection much more valuable than the sum of its parts (Jandrić and Hayes 2020b; Jandrić et al. 2020). Six months ago, we collectively jumped into an unknown research rabbit hole. Today, we need to start making sense of what this jump could mean for our understanding of the Covid-19 pandemic and postdigital research at large.

¹ This quote is taken from Krista Galyen’s email to Petar Jandrić from 30 August 2020. The quote is reproduced with the author’s permission.

Welcome to Viral Modernity

Unsurprisingly, my messy call for papers has resulted with a messy journal issue lain down below this editorial. In more than 50 articles, authored by nearly 200 people from more than 30 countries and all continents, one can find a true ‘history of the present’ (Jandrić and Hayes 2020b); ‘a valuable historical document, which provides important insights into a crucial moment in the Covid-19 pandemic ... highly relevant and non-replicable inputs for researchers, policy-makers, governments, and everyone else interested in the present and future of global education’ (Jandrić et al. 2020); a ‘message [that] clearly points towards the inclusion of instinct and emotion into our philosophies and sciences’ (Jandrić 2020c); a foundation of theory of viral modernity (Peters et al. 2020a); a warning that ‘there is no bad pandemic, only bad science’ (Jandrić 2020d); a viral theory of post-truth (Peters et al. 2020b; McLaren 2020; Rose 2020), and much more.

While this collection is clearly valuable in more ways than I can account for in this editorial, this self-indulgent selection of quotes from and about my own work has another purpose: it is designed to irritate the reader, and point towards important deficiencies of our sciences such as excessive data deluge and ‘winner takes it all’ attention economy. Welcome to viral modernity, where we produce more and more research for less and less people, and where chances to have one’s argument heard are approaching chances of winning a lottery.

Viral modernity 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. The concept draws a close association between viral biology on the one hand and information science on the other – it is an illustration and prime example of bioinformationalism (Peters 2012) that brings together two of the most powerful forces that now drive cultural evolution. The concept of viral modernity applies to viral technologies, codes and ecosystems in information, publishing, education and emerging knowledge (journal) systems. Evolutionary bioinformatics indicate the conceptual closeness between the two. (Peters et al. 2020a).

Based on the concept of bioinformationalism, a concept that Michael Peters has been teasing out for years (see Peters 2012) before the Covid-19 pandemic brought about its 15 minutes of fame, viral modernity ‘recognizes the dialectic between biological viruses and information viruses, or more generally between inanimate matter and life’ (Peters et al. 2020b). It insists on the political nature of the Covid-19 pandemic, on dialectics between the biological Covid-19 pandemic and informational pandemics such as post-truth, and sends a clear anti-capitalist message that further development of the pandemic ‘will depend on ways we educate ourselves and others for new reconfigurations aimed at (socialist) alternatives to capitalism’ (Peters et al. 2020b).

We Are the Virus

Looking from the lens of viral modernity, the Covid-19 pandemic has sparked a viral research response. The world's scientists now produce so much Covid-19-related material that it is humanly impossible to read everything that gets published. This leaves us with two choices and combinations thereof: we can either play the game of popularity, and read only the most cited papers, or we can process all papers using some sort of artificial intelligence. Needless to say, both choices are highly unsatisfactory (see Peters et al. 2020a). How can we know whether the most popular papers offer the best contributions to the problem? And how can we trust our artificial intelligences which have shown so many biases in the past?

Nevertheless, we continue to play the only game we know—based on anecdotal selection of previous research findings, we produce more and more research publications. After all, this is what we have been trained for and what we are hopefully good at. Publishing this mammoth issue, *Postdigital Science and Education* is a fertile ground, and a host, for the bioinformationalist virus of Covid-19 research publication. Authors in this issue, writing about the virus, are also the virus. And I, the journal's editor and author of the Call for papers, am what epidemiologists call a super spreader of the bioinformationalist virus of Covid-19 research publication.

By any means, this poignant critique of our research practice does not mean that we should ignore the pandemic, that we should do less research, or even that we should try to say more with less words (although the last idea seems highly appealing, I am aware of the potential loss of meaning associated with abbreviating of research findings). Living in the age of viral modernity also does not mean that you and I are real viruses, or that *Postdigital Science and Education* is a real viral host. Yet the problem remains. While we cannot be blamed for doing what we have been trained for and what we know best, we do need to admit that our training and skills are terribly outdated. The postdigital challenge of Covid-19 does not only require more traditional research—more importantly, it also requires development of conceptually different research (Jandrić 2020e). Given the rupture and continuation nature of our postdigital reality (Jandrić et al. 2018: 895), these two requirements are not at odds. Yet given the state of the art of Covid-19 research, I believe that the development of conceptually different research is definitely more urgent.

I am deeply convinced that we should develop critical awareness of this problem as soon as possible, and I believe that we should urgently do something about it. This is easier said than done, and the crucial question, as always, is *What exactly needs to be done?* While I do not have an answer to this question, I think that we could perhaps start with the example of Monty Python, who created some of the best comedy there is, while being the fiercest critics of their own work. While we polish our little texts and pictures for publication, we should always think of how, by whom, and with what purpose, these materials will be used in the future.

In the age of viral modernity, postdigital science and education does not have room for self-indulgence and box-ticking benchmarks. We need to experiment with strong, brave research practices unafraid of shaking up superstructures—even though we know that most of our attempts will end up hopelessly wrong. Engagement in such practices is obviously restricted by existential concerns, and I do not have the right to judge anyone who produces low-risk traditional research to make a living (see Jandrić 2015).

But we should never forget that doing research is a calling, not a job, and that we do need to balance our existential needs with our mission to improve the world.

We are now eight months into the pandemic, and six months into this issue. By now, we did well—the world slowly adjusts to ‘the new normal’, and this issue of *Postdigital Science and Education* offers a hugely important insight into the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, this editorial is not a tap on the authors’ collective back, or an editor’s self-praise for a job well done. Instead, it is a reminder that we now need to continue to we-think, we-feel, we-act, and we-learn (Jandrić 2019) in new and radically different ways.

Winds of Change

Viruses are all around us, pandemics are regular historical events, and Covid-19 is likely to remain. Our today’s reality may be different than it used to be only last year, yet speaking historically, there is nothing special about such changes. Against the common route taken by many journals, which now publish special issues on the Covid-19 pandemic, I took a different approach. This is a regular issue of *Postdigital Science and Education*, because it explores what happens to our reality, because it develops new research approaches to this reality, and because the journal will continue to do so, in times to come. This issue’s title, ‘The Day After Covid-19,’ implicates its double identity: as a snapshot of an important historical moment, and as a marker of urgency for developing new research approaches suitable for our post-Covid-19 reality.

Browsing about the latest bout of racism in the USA, I recently stumbled across a powerful line written in the Urban Dictionary by an anonymous contributor under the pseudonym Monkey Dad.

‘I can’t breathe’, said Floyd as he was being suffocated. ‘I can’t breathe’ thought more than 100,000 victims as they were dying of Covid. ‘I can’t breathe’ chanted countless Americans in the streets, protesting enduring police brutality.²

Monkey Dad’s got the point—the inability to breathe is a medical, social, racial, and political problem. Add an adjective of your choice—educational, artistic, whatever—and you cannot go wrong. The humankind needs a breath of fresh air, different than pre-Covid-19, not because of Covid-19, but because Covid-19 is a direct consequence of our current way of life (O’Sullivan 2020).

Protection against transmission of Covid-19 involves regular ventilation of closed spaces—and this recommendation should be taken both literally and metaphorically. We need to open all doors and windows, demolish a wall or two, and let winds of change into our socio-economic systems, theories, and minds entrenched in the logic of capitalism, environmental destruction, and (academic) complacency. The new winds will take away our stale stench, fill our lungs with fresh air, and clear up the skies to show us new horizons and opportunities for a more humane life. ‘The Day After Covid-

² See <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=I%20can%27t%20breathe>. Accessed 11 September 2020.

19' is just a tiny breeze, and I often question whether it even blows in the right direction. Ten or twenty years from now, it would hurt me to learn that this issue has been barking up the wrong tree. While many life lessons are painful, I strongly believe that honest trial and error are better than burying our heads in the sand of empty complacency.

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