

postdigital and|versus urgent publishing

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[Abstract: If the term 'postdigital' boils down to breaking up older binaries of digital versus non-digital and "old media" versus "new media", the question remains which practices may best exemplify it. In this workshop, we will focus on recent phenomena of what I propose to call urgent publishing: acts of publishing driven by personal or communal urgency that inform new assemblages and hybridizations of the publishing media - from anonymous meme accounts feeding back into street activism to YouTube lectures driving book sales. Participants will be invited to a collective brainstorm in order to broaden the range of examples and draw preliminary conclusions on the interrelation of urgent and postdigital publishing.]

Since the research project in whose framework I am presenting my talk (at Gutenberg Universität Mainz) is in the area of newspaper and magazine publishing studies, I wanted to focus on examples that are relevant for this particular field.

postdigital?

But first of all: what do we mean with postdigital? I must confess that I am not sure whether I know it myself. It even seems that I know it less and less over the course of time.

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The Aesthetics of Failure: “Post-Digital” Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music

The digital revolution is over.

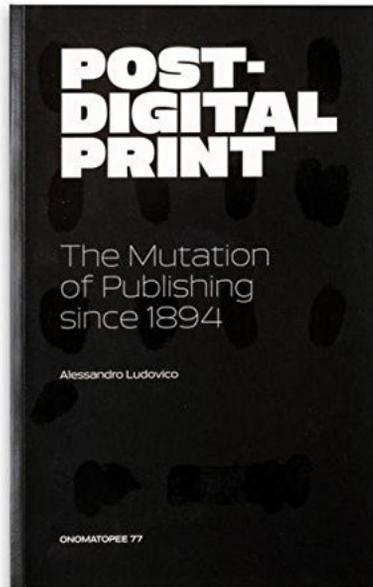
— Nicholas Negroponte (1998)

Over the past decade, the Internet has helped spawn a new movement in digital music. It is not academically based, and for the most part the composers involved are self-taught. Music journalists

obtain a good, basic understanding of it. University computer music centers breed developers whose tools are shuttled around the Internet and used to develop new music outside the university.

Unfortunately, cultural exchange between non-academic artists and research centers has been lacking. The post-digital music that Max, SMS, AudioSculpt, PD, and other such tools make pos-

It has been a confusing term from the beginning. “Post-digital” was coined in an essay written by the electronic musician and composer Kim Cascone in 2000. The text was a critical revision of the progress narrative inherent in the term “digital”, which was rampant (not only) in electronic music at that time. It boiled down to “digital” better, progress, future, and in the case of electronic music: improved sound quality through high technology. Against this, Cascone proposed a low-tech approach to computer music that embraced inexpensive consumer devices (such as laptops instead of studio equipment) and integrated the errors, crashes and glitches of the technology into its aesthetics. Cascone’s “post-digital” was therefore not “post-digital” in any literal sense.



13 years later, Alessandro Ludovico and I reactivated this term. Alessandro had been a fellow in our research program at Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam where we investigated, at that time, the transformation of graphic design and publishing through electronic publishing.

Based on his own work experience as an editor and publisher of a print magazine on digital art (which, on the surface, sounds like an oxymoron), Alessandro wrote the book on the seeming paradox that the death of print and paper through electronic technology had been declared many times for more than a century, but never actually happened.

The book concludes that electronic and print publishing will continue to co-exist, and hybridized in new, hopefully interesting forms.

To give some insight into the making of this book: originally, it had been meant to be just a 4000 words essay, but eventually grew into this book. And perhaps most significantly, we came up with its title - since both of us had been familiar with the term "post-digital" in electronic music - only after the manuscript had been finished. This why Alessandro doesn't explicitly define "post-digital" in the book, and I tried to do it in my afterword and, shortly after, in a series of essays on the subject.

Google Scholar postdigital

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[M. Causey](#) - Theatre Journal, 2016 - muse.jhu.edu
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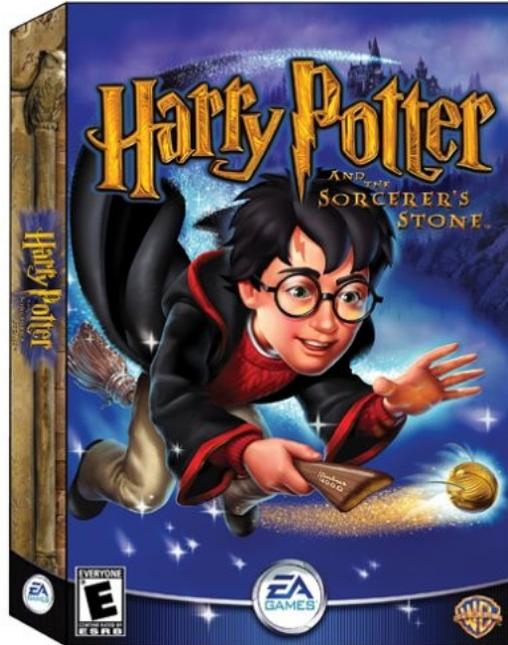
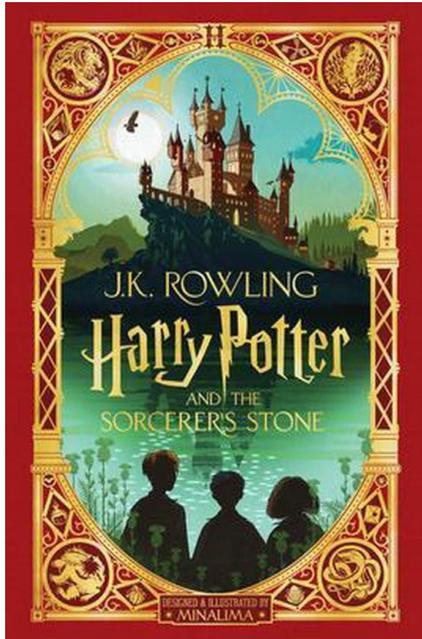
Postdigital research measurement
[P. Jandrić](#) - Postdigital Science and Education, 2021 - Springer
 Some years ago my dear friend Hamish Macleod emailed me the article entitled Peter Higgs: I wouldn't be productive enough for today's academic system (Aitkenhead 2013). The Nobel Prize winning physicist, and one of my intellectual heroes, said that he had a hard ...
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The end of the beginning: Normativity in the postdigital museum
[R. Parry](#) - Museum Worlds, 2013 - berghahnjournals.com
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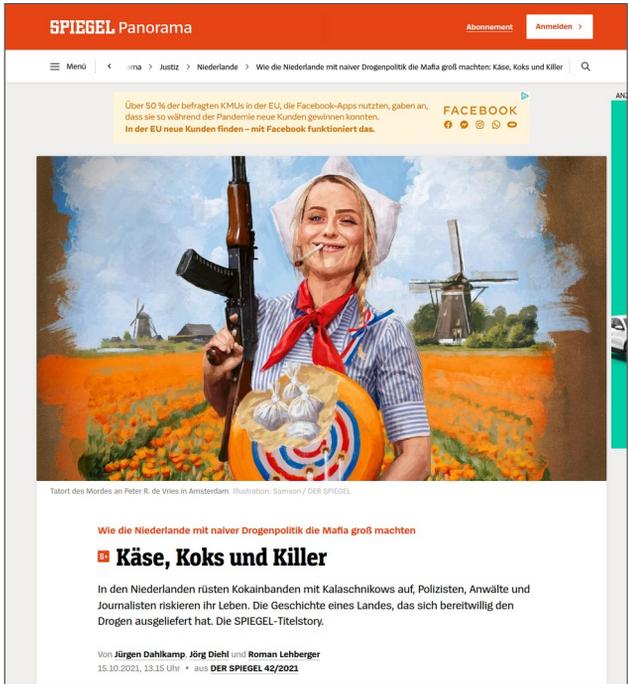
What does the 'postdigital' mean for education? Three critical perspectives on the digital, with implications for educational research and practice
[J. Knox](#) - Postdigital Science and Education, 2019 - Springer
 This paper examines what the term **postdigital** might mean for education through the discussion of human-technology relationships. It begins with a summary of two general interpretations of the **postdigital**: firstly, to understand the 'post' as meaning simply 'posterior ...
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But since then, the term has seemingly taken up a life of its own. The way it is being used in academic literature seems to be more or less as a synonym of "new media" or "digital media", although both of us actually had proposed it as a term to break up the dichotomy of "old" and "new media", "analog" and "digital", or in the case of publishing: print and online.

So a question is: does the term "postdigital" still make sense in 2021? For the field of art, I don't actually think so: not only because it has been muddled or watered down in later academic literature, but also because it partly overlaps with, partly differs from and thus causes confusion with, the term "Post-Internet" art (that peaked around the same time).



In the field of publishing media - and perhaps also: retail commerce -, however, the term “post-digital” still might make sense, but then more or less boils down to what is now more commonly called “dual channel”: in retail, combinations of online and brick-and-mortar shops; in publishing, ways of putting the same or similar content into both print and digital distribution, in complementary and, optimally: mutually supporting ways (such as in this example of a Harry Potter novel and its corresponding video game).



To take a prominent example of German news and mass media: this is of course is a form of post-digital publishing we are all familiar with - the "dual channel" approaching of selling news both in print and online (in this case, behind a paywall).



But let's take a perhaps more interesting example of postdigital mass media publishing:

Although we conventionally think of social media as "communications" (similar to phone calls) and print or online newspapers and magazines as "publishing", I would argue that social media communication has become publishing. (For media such as YouTube perhaps even more obviously than Twitter and Instagram.)

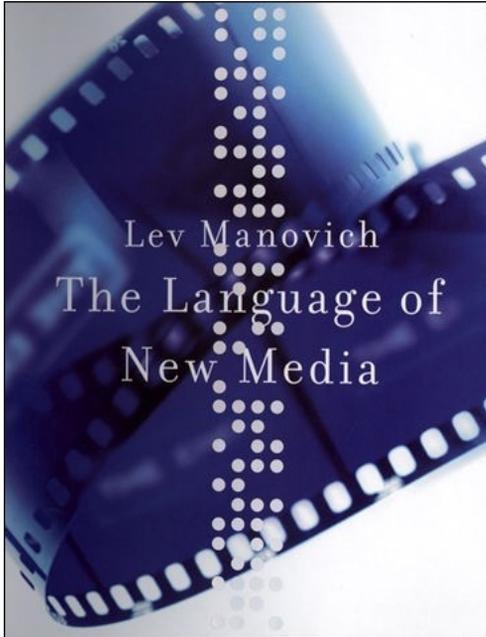
"#metoo" clearly was a publishing campaign: namely, to make silenced acts of abuse public, and publish their accounts (a) globally and (b) into a cumulative anthology or archive.



In structure, this is quite similar to how in 1971, this famous campaign (where women confessed to have had abortions) was published in one of the most popular West German mass media. This article and campaign had been initiated by Germany's celebrity feminist Alice Schwarzer who back in the time worked as a journalist for this magazine.



One might argue that "#metoo" is simply a new media update to such campaigns and confessionals, in a more contemporary medium using today's technology and its participatory possibilities.



1. numerical representation
2. modularity
3. automation
4. variability
5. transcoding

Lev Manovich,
five principles of new media (2001)

"#metoo" even meets Lev Manovich's "5 Principles of New Media":

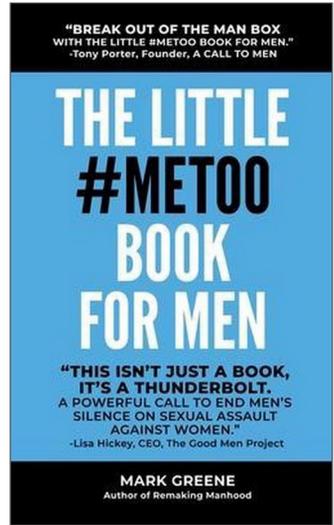
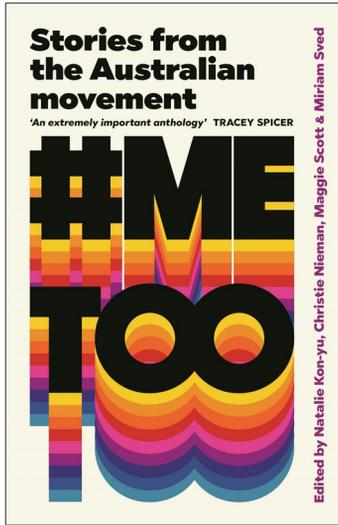
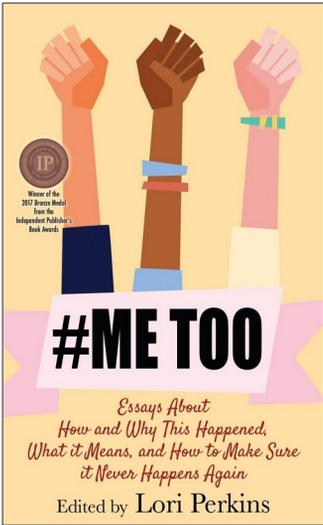
- numerical representation; through the digital code of the Internet
- modularity; through the possibility to embed and retweet Tweets
- automation; through Twitter's algorithms
- variability (or versioning); through the replies, each of which functions as a version update of the #metoo archive
- transcoding (from one into another medium): through the fact that #metoo was transcoded (a) from the film production world (whose official *making ofs* did not include these stories) and (b) into other media such as tv, radio and print news (where the tweets appeared, among others, as screenshots in newspapers)



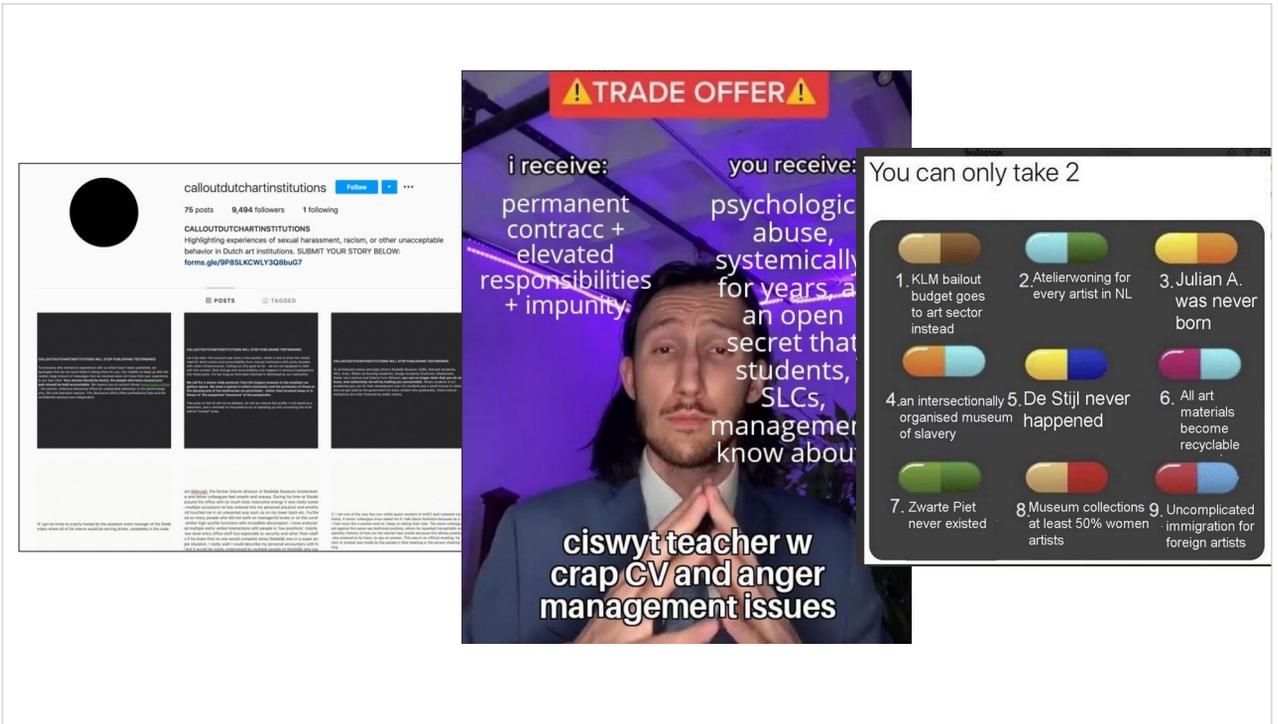
This transcoding, however, is not digital but post-digital, since it did not remain in the digital realm, respectively the Internet. Instead, by being transcoded into so-called “old” media, it exceeded Manovich's new media definition.



Here are examples of “#metoo” appearing in television news.

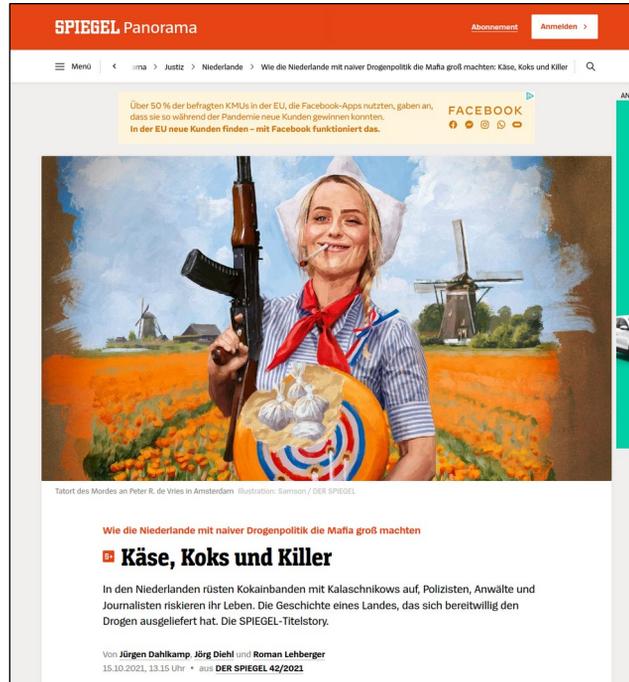


Examples from book publishing.



In the Netherlands, we witnessed a similar campaign "Call Out Dutch Art Institutions" after a case of an artist who had sexually assaulted women without institutions and police seriously looking into accusations over the course of several years.

Ultimately, this led to the resignation of directors of art institutions and an art school. In this campaign, a lot of the post-digital publishing was done in the form of memes from anonymous or pseudonymous Instagram accounts, which in several cases spilled over into street protests, which subsequently created new memes.



Why are the previous examples - #metoo, Call Out Dutch Art Institutions, Alt-Right trolling and Corona deniers – (if you agree) rather strong examples of post-digital publishing phenomena, and why is this one rather dull and uninspiring [although the illustration might have its own memetic qualities]?

In the above case, post-digital publishing boils down to a simple act of putting classical editorial content into two different delivery channels or media, with the classical hierarchy of sender versus receiver, or producer versus consumer, and a classical sales model firmly in place.

In the case of both #metoo and the Alt-Right memes, there is a complex feedback system in which the roles of sender and receiver aren't fixed (news editors become receivers of Tweets, and then senders that amplify them to their audiences etc.) and where information travels from one medium to another, not as an end point, but as a point of departure for yet another point of departure.

In other words, the dynamic of postdigital dual-channel publishing is linear, that of postdigital memetic publishing is nonlinear. (I don't mean "linear" and "nonlinear" in the conventional simplified media studies sense [such as 'linear tv' vs. a 'nonlinear video game'], but as in physics and science – i.e. in the sense of a nonlinear mathematical function, or chaotic dynamics through a complex set of factors that interfere with each other in hardly predictable ways.)

postdigital versus urgent publishing

But if the term "postdigital" cannot describe the difference between conventional two-channel publishing and complex memetic feedback back loop publishing, it seems to be lacking or insufficient.

My proposal (which I also recently published in an Open Access essay "What is Urgent Publishing", <https://apria.artez.nl/what-is-urgent-publishing/>) is to shift our attention from medium to urgency:

The common characteristic of "#metoo", "Call out Dutch Art Institutions", Alt-Right trolling and Corona denier propaganda is that they were driven by urgency, and acquired their complex dynamic through urgency. (Even if one may disagree with the urgency of some issues, such as those of the Alt-Right and Corona deniers: this criterium ultimately is about subjective, or affective, urgency.)

The "Stern" cover of 1971 addressed and created urgency, as did "#metoo" in 2017, each in their own ways and using the media technologies available in their specific time.

- 1) responsiveness
- 2) reaching intended communities
- 3) emerging from communities and their needs
- 4) fostering identification
- 5) spreading virally (to some extent)

[apologies for the shameless plug! -
<https://apria.artez.nl/what-is-urgent-publishing/>]

In order not to exceed my speaking time, I would like to take a shortcut to my definition of urgent publishing:

In my aforementioned essay, I tried to differentiate urgent publishing from propaganda, and as a result came up with the above five criteria.

When looking at #metoo again (an example I actually hadn't thought of when I wrote the article), it clearly meets all five criteria - while the same is more doubtful, for example, for the print and online issues of "Der Spiegel".

In other words, both are examples of post-digital publishing, but only "#metoo" is also a good example of urgent publishing. (The urgency of publishing an editorial medium like "Der Spiegel" is mostly driven by its publisher – to a lesser degree by an outside community.)

This also means: today, most urgent publishing is post-digital - in the sense of traversing media and information technologies of any kind. But not all post-digital publishing is urgent.

However, I would argue that the most complex and advanced post-digital publishing phenomena are all examples of urgent publishing.

And, to clarify, I brought in the examples of the Alt-Right and Corona deniers to demonstrate that "urgent publishing" as such is neither ethically "good" or "bad".

[I would personally advise any new publishing project to have both a post-digital and an urgency strategy – which includes research publishing.]

**more
examples?**

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