

Potter, J. (2018) 'Problematizing learning in the age of data 'acquisition': Issues in research, teaching and learning with digital media and technology' *Learning, Media and Technology*, 43:2, 117-118, DOI: [10.1080/17439884.2018.1472608](https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2018.1472608)

[ACCEPTED VERSION]

How do we respond as researchers and educators to the revelations around Cambridge Analytica, Facebook and others in recent times? Many commentators have had their say on these events and their consequences. The consensus has been that they represent only a fraction of the buying and selling of personal data that has been going on since the dawn of (internet) time. With the persistence of certain journalists and with the benefit of direct whistle-blower testimony, the detail of the Facebook case has emerged into the public domain. It appears that the attraction of an app with the ironic title of 'This is your digital life' drew many people with active Facebook accounts into a data harvesting operation of huge significance for our times, politically, socially and economically.

At the same time, the news that personal data can be misused in this way has arrived at a particular moment when the use/misuse of personal data is taking centre stage in research into technology in education. Here again, as previously noted, the collection of mass datasets from children, often with no understanding of what is happening to them on the part of either the children or their carers is becoming an agenda item of huge significance (Williamson, 2017).

The focus for researchers, then, is shifting from exploring the act of such data 'acquisition' itself to the complexity of how the various acquirers are aggregating that data and where, if anywhere, the limits of that activity are being drawn. Profiling is extending to every aspect of a child's life from their knowledge and skills, to their own personal dispositions and circumstances. We know far less about the actual algorithms applied to such data but we do know that they stand as a proxy for children and students in an increasingly arcane negotiation with the aims and objectives of education, which have been politicised beyond what might once have been thought possible.

How does this research focus feed back into a curriculum context? Where does a discussion about datafication, data-acquisition or data harvesting begin when taken into places of learning with students of all ages? Is it, as some have suggested, somehow to be placed in the context of a computing curriculum? Can there ever be such a component in a subject which considers itself ethically neutral and based on logic and procedural activity? The disconnect between ethics and action is partly what generated the Facebook situation in the first place. Many talented developers and programmers have faith in the purity of data and act digital making as a force for good. But in the case of 'This is your digital life' there is a curious divorce from being able to make something and how it is used to bring about action on the world, and for what purposes.

Does learning about datafication instead belong in a media literacy context, if you happen to be fortunate enough to live somewhere which places high value on education about the media? And, outside educational institutions, how do we enable conversations between

parents, carers, students and children about such matters? Recent commentary on a variety of academic blogs has put forward frameworks. Amanda Third (2018) has suggested that Cambridge Analytica and its actions should be located in the dialogue between carers and children. Others have written from the parental perspective, calling for dialogue and information in the light of the General Data Protection Regulation act in the European Union (Livingstone & Ólafsson, 2018). Meanwhile, David Buckingham (2018) persuasively argues that media studies still provides the most coherent and appropriate set of tools for teaching about social media from a range of social and political perspectives.

The context for educational engagement with these issues is complicated and muddled by the discourse over educational standards and safety, in which children, students and carers mis-recognise themselves in particular roles and particular kinds of habitus. There is a sense in which monitoring of all kinds can be legitimised as 'mission critical' for safety. There are forms of data collection about abilities, aptitudes and dispositions which are positioned as a great leap forward for personalisation. There is, however, precious little in the rhetoric which suggests that any kind of consensus is emerging on how these idealised versions of people and practices become enacted in the world. Which dispositions and strategies are ideal and valued? In addition to the commonplace, problematic and reductive notions of learning progress visited on schools and other educational institutions in recent years, we have newly emergent metrics which have previously existed in a specific context, amongst the thousands of inter-personal interactions of childhood.

Finally, where does all this leave the notion of curation, of making the self in digital media? If the apparent freedom to create turns out to mean creating data for corporations, what are the consequences for the supposedly agentive acts of posting, sharing and curating? Perhaps, as Buckingham suggests (2018), we need to turn to media studies for an answer to this. Between the superstructure and the base, between the relations of production and an end user at the screen there is an interstitial space in which some kind of personal agency is enacted, even if it turns out to be a simulacrum of agency reflected back from a screen. The push and pull of personal agency and structural determinants beyond the individual has long been present in the study of media and cultural studies and may still provide a good location for beginning to make sense of these latest events and their impact on how we are in the world, in our 'digital lives'.

The research response to any significant event is necessarily slower than the available commentary in blogs and tweets. It is, however, a much-needed debate as the noise from the initial discoveries around Facebook and Cambridge Analytica recede from the foreground of the news and resume their place working away in the background. We look forward to publishing much more in the way of critical enquiry into these emergent issues which feature dynamic methodologies appropriate for the dynamic literacies of the time and which concern how these play out in the lived experience of learning, media and technology.

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