



## Educational co-production in the age of digital reason: A review of the digital university: A dialogue and manifesto

Alexander J. Means

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Educational co-production in the age of digital reason: A review of the digital university: A dialogue and manifesto** by Peters, M. A., and Jandrić, P, New York, Peter Lang, 2018, 376 pp., \$ 109.95 (hardback), ISBN 1433145138, 978-1433145131

*The Digital University: A Dialogue and Manifesto*, by Michael A. Peters and Petar Jandric, arrives at a moment of sociotechnical transition associated with global cybernetic capitalism. We live a moment of speed, where collective capacities for critical reflection appear stunted by the sheer velocity of change, wrought by emerging synergies between artificial intelligence, human connectivity, and conflicts over information, truth, and power. In this insightful and timely book, Peters and Jandric provide a set of ethical principles and intellectual signposts for making sense of this condition. Moreover, they point toward modes of education and collective intelligence capable of generating alternative forms of digital co-production and sociotechnical life.

Peters and Jandric employ 'digital reason' and 'digital university' as conceptual anchors to ground their project. Digital reason is a periodizing term meant to capture a diverse pattern of intersecting trends that are transforming economy, sociality, politics, and the university. Digital reason is a Kantian-style formation, which Peters and Jandric characterize as encompassing a 'general basis for understanding the nature of contemporary human cultural evolution' as it unfolds in relation to education and new technology (p. 4). Peters and Jandric argue that the epoch of digital reason is ultimately a fraught and contradictory historical formation, one that the university and educational processes more broadly must reflexively attend. They elaborate:

We live in an age of digital reason, which has significantly altered the traditional order of things. In our epoch, yesterday's institutions will either become slaves to corporate capitalism, or they will significantly transform in order to maintain an active role in the co-creation of the present and the future. Political, social, and economic pressures strongly favor the first option—however, we firmly believe that our society needs to opt for the latter. It is only with free knowledge creation, and free education, that our society and its members can be truly free. (p. 5)

Drawing on John Holloway's phrase *in, against, and beyond*, Peters and Jandric position their work as a form of collaborative co-production embedded within an emerging digital university that exists as a multidimensional site of conflict over knowledge production and the future:

We understand that our work is deeply imbued *in* the current system of knowledge production and education. Our research points toward various systemic problems with this system, and we strongly argue *against* these problems. Instead of succumbing to the frightening and often non-productive binary characteristic for the position *in and against*, we strive *beyond* the current university and towards our vision of the digital university. Our book consists of academic inquiry, solutions development, social and philosophical visions, and the ethos of radical openness—and we believe that all of these components are essential for developing a viable path toward the future. (p. 5)

In this spirit, *The Digital University* is generatively structured as a creative experiment in knowledge production and intellectual co-creation. As such, the 20 chapters in the book take different analytical, textual, and narrative forms such as traditional academic papers, philosophical dialogues, interviews, and collectively written pieces. The chapters are exploratory—posing questions, reframing old and new problems, and generating new concepts.

In terms of organization, the book is divided into three thematic sections. The first section, *The University in the Age of Digital Reason*, consists of eight chapters that provide philosophical scaffolding for the project. Drawing on a vast, almost encyclopedic, array of scholarly literatures, and thinkers across the social sciences and humanities, these chapters examine issues such as human rights and the idea

of codifying digital universality, artificial intelligence and automation of labor, cybernetic capitalism and fast knowledge, digital science and informational democracy.

The second section, *Collective Intelligence and The Co-creation of Digital Goods*, expands on these themes. Chapters include interviews with Fred Turner and French Philosopher Pierre A. Levy that reflect on digitalization, modernity, collective knowledge formation, and the Anthropocene. This section also includes fascinating collective writing experiments by the New Zealand-based Editor's Collective that explore academic publishing in the era of digital reason.

The third section, *Digital Teaching, Digital Learning, and Digital Science*, consists of a series of dialogues between Peters and Jandric, where the authors provide their most sustained vision of the digital university. Following other scholars who have analyzed the digital economy such as Yockai Benkler, they argue that the digital era enables the abundance of knowledge, free and open access, and networked co-production of ideas and solutions to social and environmental problems. Peters and Jandric argue for a notion of radical openness and collaboration as key principles of a new emancipatory digital university and knowledge culture. They elaborate:

We are at a stage today where we can begin to investigate links between creativity, the mode of digital production, and the logic of public organizations. With the advent of the internet, Web 2.0 technologies and user-generated cultures, new principles of radical openness have become the basis of innovative institutional forms that decentralize and democratize power relationships, promote access to knowledge and encourage symmetrical, horizontal peer learning relationships. In this changed context, radical openness is a complex code word that represents a change in philosophy and ethos, a set of interrelated and complex changes that transforms markets, the mode of production and consumption, as well as the underlying institutions... This form of openness is intimately linked to epistemic democracy and has been theorized in different ways by Dewey, Pierce, and Popper as a community of 'inquiry'—a set of values and philosophy committed to the ethic of criticism as a basis for the growth of knowledge. (p. 341)

For Peters and Jandric, radical openness as the basis for an emerging digital university represents a *concrete* as opposed to *abstract* potentiality that internalizes a number of tensions associated with the contemporary nature of *Bildung*, or educational self-formation. Foremost, the university is increasingly captured by market logics that seek to subordinate education and knowledge production to narrow economic and technocratic logics and goals. *Bildung* here becomes reduced to research and learning to serve the proprietary imperatives of cognitive capitalism and its transnational corporate and financial imperatives. This enclosure of the knowledge commons within the neoliberal university is inhibiting the development of transformational modes of labor, learning, and cooperation. Here Peters and Jandric suggest that realization of radical openness as an ideal is contingent on the reinvention of *Bildung*—'that balances the individual and the social, rationality and irrationality, and links self-interest to collective interest' (p. 340). An emancipatory vision of *Bildung* aims to both affirm and intensify the potential for radical openness and co-creation that the age of digital reason and its platforms make possible.

A strength that runs throughout *The Digital University* is located precisely in this commitment to a set of positive visions for education and society based on radical openness and collaboration. In both its form and content the book enacts an experimental and optimistic vision of the future as an outgrowth of digital reason and the emergence of new social capabilities. We need more projects and experiments like this that eschew the narrow registers of academic publishing and that create new expressions and visions for knowledge production and social life. However, I also couldn't help feeling that the notion of radical openness was analytically underdeveloped in relation to the formative modes of closure that are everywhere present in our digital era and that are enabled through new technologies. This includes such disparate phenomena as mass surveillance and predatory data mining; the decline of symbolic efficiency and a disturbing synergy (in many societies) of state propaganda and conspiracy theory; the growth of religious and other fundamentalisms; the oligarchic capture of the state and economy; and a turn toward reactionary populism and neo-fascism, including new expressions of racism and ethnic hatred.

While the digital age may provide new platforms, there is little evidence to suggest that radical openness is either advancing within our institutions and/or that it is capable of providing the foundation for politics necessary for overcoming these truly frightening patterns of social, cultural, economic, pedagogical, and intellectual closure. Peters and Jandric are well aware of these issues and are careful to

build nuance into to their arguments, recognizing that any worthwhile intellectual project always has limitations. Thus, their rendering of radical openness can be read as a utopian provocation *in, against, and beyond* cynicism or fatalism. I for one hope that they are right and that the vision of openness and collaboration they proscribe materializes. However, given the current dispensation, I find myself taking a more skeptical view.

*The Digital University* is a fascinating book. It is brimming with vision, and will no doubt provide an insightful tool for policymakers, researchers, and students interested in rethinking the form, content, and purpose of education in our age of digital reason. I highly recommend it.

Alexander J. Means

*Department of Educational Foundations, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, Honolulu, HI, USA*

 [alexmeans1@gmail.com](mailto:alexmeans1@gmail.com)

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