

Authoritarian EdTech

Eamon Costello 
Dublin City University

Stephen Gow 
Edinburgh Napier University

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Abstract

Careful and consentful models of digital education are being replaced by Authoritarian EdTech. The pedagogical choices digital learning now offers, such as how to design assessment strategies in and around Gen AI, mask not just the opportunity costs of attending to a digital permacrisis, but the simultaneous enactment of EdTech's authority through its increasingly urgent demands on and for our attention. Educational technology has become, in its ontological infrastructures, increasingly centralised, less open and more powerful. Through GenAI, it is less truthful, less trustworthy and more epistemologically nihilistic. Authoritarian EdTech is examined here through examples such as Trump's relationship with AI in Education (AIED), wider AIED responses and the resultant features of consentless technologies that thrive on appeasement and higher education's new digitised monumental architectures. We end by suggesting that neither authoritarianism, EdTech nor Authoritarian EdTech are inevitable if we can recognise and remember that from which our only true authority derives.

Keywords

EdTech, critical pedagogy, authoritarianism, postdigital, digital learning, platformisation

Careful and consentful models of digital education are being replaced by Authoritarian EdTech. The pedagogical choices digital learning now offers, such as how to design assessment strategies in and around Gen AI, mask not just the opportunity costs of attending to a digital permacrisis, but the simultaneous enactment of EdTech's authority through its increasingly urgent demands on and for our attention. Educational technology has become, in its ontological infrastructures, increasingly centralised, less open and more powerful. Through GenAI, it is less truthful, less trustworthy and more epistemologically nihilistic. Authoritarian EdTech forecloses space for meaningful agentic participation, offering instead performative and inconsequential choices to

learners and teachers. Its constituent technologies, for example, are not adopted through careful procurement, research and consultation, but through top-down searches rapidly conducted to source the cheapest and most legal ways for educational institutions to live with new products. Although such products are announced on the market to upend traditional educational assessment forms and labour configurations, EdTech markets do not really exist.

Corresponding author:

Eamon Costello, School of STEM Education Innovation and Global Studies, Dublin City University, Dublin, Drumcondra, Dublin 9, Ireland.

Email: eamon.costello@dcu.ie

Rather, under technofeudalism, each ‘marketplace’ or ‘appstore’ is controlled by one Big Tech strongman (Varoufakis, 2023). Markets refer only to unwitting marks of the scam economy. The previous worst-case Fordist models of EdTech – ‘any color you like as long as it’s Blackboard’ (Dron, 2006) – are now superseded by post-capitalist, technofeudalist and Authoritarian EdTech, which enacts an ongoing war on choice, consent, community and truth. Authoritarian EdTech is examined here through examples such as Trump’s relationship with AI in Education (AIED), wider AIED responses and the resultant features of consentless technologies that thrive on appeasement and higher education’s new digitised monumental architecture.

In a bombastic and authoritarian display of power on his first day of office, US President Donald Trump revoked 78 Executive Orders, among them a dictum to overturn Biden Executive Order 14110 on the ‘Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy Development and Use of Artificial Intelligence’ (Cassidy et al., 2025). This act required developers of AI systems to conduct and share the results of safety tests with the US government before releasing such systems to the public. Further, it directed US agencies to set standards for that testing. In the following months the government proceeded to purge AI safety and cybersecurity bodies (Geller, 2025), to revoke funding for disinformation and misinformation research (Owens, 2025) and shutter the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (Rugaber, 2025). On 15 April 2025, ChatGPT maker OpenAI fell into step, announcing it would cease testing and categorising particular societal risks that its products might pose before releasing them. These risks included whether AI could be used for malevolent persuasion (such as to manipulate elections). Such risks would instead be covered by ChatGPT’s Terms of Service, which would instruct users not to use the software for such purposes. Soon after, Trump signed an Executive Order on the integration of AI into K12 education and teacher training. In all these ways, the administration has shown its keen interest in rendering an AI power that would be unqualified, unchecked and unquestionably adjacent to the state and its leader. Wielding AI through the leader’s decrees in this way, as a ‘vulgar display of power’ (Pantera, 1992), is aimed at social agents

who will not just be made but seduced, ‘to join and adhere to Trump’s populist rhetoric’ (Zembylas, 2020). All of this serves to undergird, enable and enact key elements of Authoritarian EdTech.

In brief, Authoritarian EdTech revolves around the oppressive foreclosure of choice, consent, debate and deliberation via constituent technologies that are not only all-powerful and all-seeing but that never seek to hide power and instead actively pursue ways to display might as both effect and cause of their authority. We do not here seek to show whether Authoritarian EdTech may be extrapolitical – capable of existing in democracies but ready to thrive in autocracies (McLaren, 2003) – or, whether it comprises a harmful pedagogical infrastructure agnostic and immune to outside political conditions. Rather, our concern is to delineate those of its internal logics that attempt to choke the exercise of democratic education.

The radical shift of responsibility by the Trump government from research-informed regulation and oversight of AI, to checkbox legalese of product terms of service, is worth contextualising within a broader EdTech political economy. A legal case taken by a parent in 2019 highlighted how 50% of children aged 6–18 in Danish schools shared personal data with Google for a decade without their consent or that of their parents (The Privacy Dad, 2024). Increasingly researchers are showing how educational dataflows are becoming so complex (Caines and Silverman, 2021; Hartong et al., 2024), opaque and pervasive as to render consent, when it does exist, as often an Orwellian inversion of the agentic outcome of any free and considered choice. *Consentlessness* is hence a key feature of Authoritarian EdTech. It exists in contradistinction to the concept of *consentful* technologies. Consentful tech draws on medical and sexual models of consent, and on feminist standpoint theory, to argue that ‘affirmative consent’ should be ‘voluntary, informed, reversible, specific, and unburdensome’ (Im et al., 2021). In consentful EdTech, the power dynamics and differentials of consent must always be foregrounded and reckoned with.

Faced with BigTech power differentials, actors, consciously or otherwise, may activate fawning responses, such as, for example, to the role of

GenAI in education. Such fawning, enabling responses we term *AI Appeasement*. Examples can be found in AI guides for teachers with titles such as ‘8 Attitudes to Help Teachers Develop an AI-Friendly Mindset’ that advocate for ‘Openness to Change’ which involves ‘Accepting that AI will reshape aspects of education—and being ready to adapt rather than resist’ (Kharbach, 2025). The respons(ability) in such guides, and as shown by policy analyses of documents issued by bodies such as UNESCO (Mochizuki et al., 2025), lie not in holding governments or companies to account in democratic, deliberative or participatory fashions but in ensuring that the tools are used ethically and responsibly by teachers.

GenAI critics argue that ethical use of unethical tools may not be possible, that a non-choice is being offered (McQuillan, 2025). EdTech markets offer platforms such as VLE/LMEs from a limited number of vendors due to incumbency effects but the situation for GenAI is far worse. Only the most powerful companies on the planet can afford the materials to build Large Language Model technology, such as chips, compute power, cloud infrastructure and legal teams to fight the owners of the data taken to train the models. Indeed, there does not appear to be, thus far, any legal or ethical ways to build GenAI technologies as they are currently understood. Nonetheless such ‘everything machines’ promise us unlimited choice, infinite synthetic optionality. They break the world such that everything is ‘optionalized’ (McDonald and Costa, 2024) and architect an extreme personalization from which we can inexhaustively extract.

Two prominent architectural forms of Authoritarian EdTech are Hostile Architecture and Monumental Architecture. Benjamin (2019) illustrates hostile architecture via cruelly designed park benches that exclude homeless people from public spaces via environmental force. Authoritarianism requires hostile architectures for the creation, criminalization and persecution of ‘others’. Trump terminated educational research grants and associated employment contracts via crude keyword lists of others: ‘marginalized’, ‘gender’, ‘sociocultural’, ‘systemic’, ‘activism’, ‘diversity’, ‘females’, ‘Indigenous community’, and ‘socioeconomic’

(Smith et al., 2025). EdTech provides ready-made hostile mechanisms for othering when it pits students against each other and students against teachers through adversarial pedagogies. GenAI plagiarism and cheating panics are classic othering techniques that contribute to pedagogical adversary by creating fear, uncertainty and distrust. Likewise at-risk learners – who can be detected and protected by learning environment analytics – are othered as ‘risky learners’ and so on (Jarke and Macgilchrist, 2021).

Monumental architecture involves large-scale structures that symbolize individual, cultural or political power, for example, the pyramids of Egypt. In the digital campus, scale conveys monumentality like no other. Scale displays concentrated power, scraped data, aggregated wealth. The ability to reach into any classroom in an instant for any reason is always there though rarely exercised. Exceptions however include the UK grading boycott where universities could hire outside staff to break the strike as essays were submitted through centralized learning management systems. Or the US professor who was sacked and informed in his dismissal letter that his university had secretly recorded and reviewed his class sessions via the Panopto lecture capture system (Billman, 2024).

Educators have experienced a digital blitzkrieg with one wave of rapid digitisation during the pandemic, followed by the live testing of GenAI in its aftermath (West, 2023) but resistance is never futile. Great courage can be taken from how UK institutions successfully worked together, threatening to turn Turnitin off, to force the company to back down from introducing a new on-by-default ‘AI-detection’ feature. Students have co-opted and occupied monumental architectures, such as renaming a prestigious benefactor building at Columbia University as ‘Hind’s hall’ to rebrand universities with victims of genocide. Authoritarianism is never inevitable. Educators can create space for everything; for pluralism, for dissensus, for the range of creative and critical responses to life that we would expect in the exercise of the freedoms that honour and liberate others instead of beating them down, and through the compassion from which our only true authority derives.

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ORCID iDs

Eamon Costello  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2775-6006>

Stephen Gow  <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2938-3623>

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