

Contradictions of Progress: Perspectives of an Educational and Diversity-Sensitive Critique of Digital Capitalism

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Abstract

The fact that the digital transformation of culture and society will influence the way people learn in the future has become a truism in education policy and society. The question of whether digital media belong in a contemporary pedagogical practice is undisputed – after all, digital media have long since become an integral part of the lives of children, young people and adults. In regard to digital ubiquity in our world, the aim of this article is to develop a critical position towards the capitalist tendencies of the digital. This perspective will be developed by the way of analysis of the inherent contradictions of individual and collective media practices.¹

Keywords: Education, Digital Capitalism, Immanent Critique, Progress, Regression

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Introduction

Educational efforts are always in some way influenced by economic structures and interests (cf. Luhmann, 1996, p. 19). In particular, the modern educational ideal of human emancipation proves to be socially compatible when placed in a context of capital accumulation and resource formation. Education is thus placed in service of to the endeavour to liberate the productive forces and optimize human labour (cf. Habermas, 1985, p. 10; Sesink, 2014, pp. 138f.).

The economic influence on education seems to be even more pronounced in relation to media education. Especially medial or technical innovations are structurally linked to economic interests (cf. Brandt, 1989; Sesink, 1997). This means that media education efforts cannot escape the interests of digital capitalism (cf. Schiller, 2000; Staab, 2019) if they recognize digital technologies as a condition for contemporary and future-oriented teaching and learning. In this regard, exclusively critical perspectives of capitalism can be seen as not very convincing.

In addition to this specific aspect, a further complication is that, although concepts of post-capitalism (cf. e.g. Mason, 2016) offer interesting ways of perspectives, they have so far proven to be difficult to implement, especially at the level of society as a whole. This raises the fundamental question of how (digital) capitalism can be effectively criticized or at least approached reflexively, when it is structurally always already linked to social needs and (media) pedagogical practices.

Possible answers to this question were considered in the light of a long tradition since Karl Marx and can take many forms: In this sense, capitalism can be criticized with regard to its function (e.g. with regard to social crises), its morals (e.g. with regard to forms and dimensions of social exploitation) or its ethics (e.g. with regard to promoting alienation and undermining the autonomy of working subjects) (cf. Jaeggi, 2013, pp. 323f.). But even with regard to these various possibilities, it can be seen that certain forms of criticism of capitalism can be productive on the one hand, but on the other hand, they always show deficits under certain conditions (cf. *ibid.*, p. 347). According to Eva Illouz, capitalism seems to repeatedly absorb its critique and transform it into productivity (cf. Illouz, 2018, p. 286; cf. also Illouz, 2017). Thus, the critical examination of capitalist structures always threatens to lead to a contradiction: there are undoubtedly many good reasons to fundamentally criticize capitalism, but obviously there is always enough reason to hold on to it.

The problem outlined here can also be applied to the concept of diversity, which is the focus of this seminar.net special issue. In their call for papers, Dander et al. point out initial contradictions in the way society deals with diversity. Here it states: "The notion of diversity is widely, if not only, received as a positive value [...]. However, in the context of current capitalist relations in general, 'diversity' has long since developed into a marketable slogan" (Dander et al., 2024, p. 1).

The following article attempts to view the problem that arises here as an opportunity. Its aim is to focus on the problem situation presented so far, in order to then develop a form of critique that does not position itself per se against (digital) capitalism at its origin, but rather recognizes the socially contradictory nature of dealing with it as a productive basis for media education. This attempt is based, on the one hand, on the realisation that every digital development entails a contradictory chain of consequences that is worth reflecting on: The internet expands the possibilities for communication and interaction, but it also manipulates its users; immense stores of knowledge can be accessed in the digital world, but these are not always correct; public spaces are becoming larger and reaching more people, but they are successively dissolving the sphere of

privacy and intimacy, etc. (cf. Meyer-Drawe, 2021, pp. 8f.). On the other hand, the considerations are based on the method of immanent critique. The crucial feature of this method is that it does not insist on a fixed critical position, but rather offers strategies and tactics that flexibly adapt to the object being criticized (cf. Illouz, 2018, p. 286; cf. also Illouz, 2017). Thus, the method of immanent critique seems particularly suitable for gaining a farsighted view of the transformations dynamics of digital economic change.

To make such a critique of digital capitalism plausible, it is first necessary to outline its contradictory tendencies and to systematically counter them with the method of immanent critique. The resulting possibility of productively negotiating the contradictions of capitalist logic of exploitation is then applied to various topics in the field of education. In a final step, it will be shown that this enables a sharpened view of the possibility of a media-pedagogical critique of capitalism that also allows other similarly contradictory concepts such as diversity to be seen in a new light.²

Three contradictory trends of digital change

The following search for contradictory trends in the digital transformation of society can be illustrated with reference to Charles Taylor. In his lecture series *The Malaise of Modernity*, Taylor points to a total of three contradictory and therefore pathological features of modern life: the individualism, the disenchantment of the world, which might also be called “the primacy of instrumental reason” (Taylor, 1991, p. 5), and the social restriction of acting (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 2-8). With all three characteristics, Taylor refers to the contradictory tendency that groundbreaking human developments are always also experienced “as loss or a decline” (*ibid.*, p. 1) and cause us both euphoria and worries (*ibid.*, pp. 7f.). In this way, Taylor’s concept of malaise (*Unbehagen*, which can be traced back to the concept of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis [1939, later in English: 2002]) still allows us to focus on individual concerns, insecurities and fears in the context of social change and transformation.

Taylor understands the concept of malaise primarily not as a product of the human psyche, but as a product of cultural and social developments. It is therefore interesting that recent German-language publications refer to an new Malaise of digitale culture (cf. Nassehi, 2019, p. 42). This new diagnosis captures the profound restructuring of society through digitalization – a process that brings about shifts in cultural norms, ideals and demands, while also contributing to individual pathologies (cf. Thein, 2023). This raises the question of how pedagogical practice, through the use of digital media, reproduces socially induced forms of malaise and their inherent contradictions. Drawing conceptually on Taylor, the following considerations address three capitalist contradictions of the digitalization of the education system. These contradictions simultaneously lead to gains and losses of freedom: the individualization of the learning subject, the disenchantment of educational institutions and the limits of media-literate action.

² The following description of the three contradictory trends of digital change expand on ideas that I have already presented elsewhere in the context of a German publication (cf. Leineweber, 2024b). Insofar as the already published observations explicitly reflect on the digitalization of school pedagogical action, the following mainly reflects on important capitalist tendencies in the context of the digital transformation of society's educational system. Equally, it attempts to address the aspect of diversity.

Individualization of the learning subject

The right to and the opportunity for individualization are considered major achievements of contemporary society and important elements of modern capitalism (cf. Honneth, 2004, pp. 465f.). The Western world in particular is characterized by the fact that it enables a large number of people to choose their own life models independently, to make decisions to the best of their knowledge and belief, and to organize their lifestyle in a self-effective way (cf. Taylor, 1991, p. 2). Digital media meet these demands in an exemplary manner: in a sense, they are *media of individualization*.

In the field of education, digital media open up the following potential, particularly with regard to *diversity*: *adapting* teaching and learning materials to heterogeneous needs, making learning *more flexible* so that it is not limited by space and time, or *personalising* learning environments with individual tasks and feedback. In particular, data-based applications are opening up more and more technical possibilities for identifying the specific interests of learners, for exploring their learning goals, strategies, organization and progress, and for supporting learning with suggestions for the learning process and self-regulated learning (cf. de Witt, 2019, p. 814). From a technological perspective in particular, digital media help to promote diversity in terms of barrier-free and individualized learning environments (cf. Ruge, 2024, pp. 17f.).

The potential outlined here cannot be dismissed out of hand. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that social-theoretical studies in particular link the ideal of individualization (and the associated values of personal responsibility, motivation, flexibility, self-regulation, etc.) with increasing social expectations that constantly put pressure on individuals to take responsibility (cf. Honneth, 2004). In this sense, we have long since been living in a *digital assessment society*, in which more and more aspects are evaluated and compared with the help of quantitative data (cf. Mau, 2018, p. 16). In this context, it can be pointed out that quantitative structures can transform into an “emotionally fossilized set of demands under whose consequences individuals today seem more likely to suffer than to prosper” (Honneth, 2004, p. 474). First and foremost, digital data motivates and promotes individual performance because it makes it possible to challenge people's self-esteem; poor results encourage people to do better next time, especially when social comparisons are possible and encouraged (cf. Mau, 2018, p. 54).

In summary, it is particularly these negative feelings that foster a certain malaise resulting from the competition organized by capitalism. In the specific context of media education, it is also significant that empirical results from school research show that the widespread use of the Antolin learning platform³ in German primary schools to enhance reading skills leads to intensified forms of self-optimizing comparison among pupils – even if the associated scores are intentionally not addressed in class (cf. Förschler et al., 2021, p. 64). Within these parameters, the concept of individualization reveals a fundamental contradiction: learning in the digital age is shaped not only by individual interests but also by societal expectations, which are maintained and reinforced by media structures (for a detailed discussion, cf. Leineweber, 2024c, p. 254). In this way, very different power structures manifest themselves. This particularly concerns the aspect that data-based learning systems categorize all learners into performance profiles and design their

³ See: <https://antolin.westermann.de>.

development opportunities in a *socio-technical* way. Because digital media primarily privilege forms of knowledge that can be easily quantified, other forms of knowledge are largely neglected.

Disenchantment of educational institutions

The contradictory view of the concept of individualization has already paved the way for what Taylor describes (in an undeniable link to Max Weber [1946, p. 7f.]) as disenchantment of the world. The source of this disenchantment is a form of economic rationalization, that “we draw on when we calculate the most economical application of means to a given end. Maximum efficiency, the best cost-output ratio, is its measures of success” (Taylor, 1991, p. 5).

Against this backdrop, it is particularly striking that discussions surrounding the use of digital media in educational institutions are invariably associated with considerations of their effectiveness and efficiency (cf. Herzig, 2021). However, digital technologies “do not automatically lead to better or worse performance outcomes” (Kerres, 2021, p. 203; transl. from German to English by CL). In general, the only truth that initially applies is that every use of technology is based on a prior decision “in favour of what works and against what does not work” (Baecker, 2016, p. 64; translation from German into English by CL). Consequently, social and educational policy calls for the digitalization of the educational landscape are invariably rooted in a rationale of purpose and instrumentality (cf. Taylor, 1991, p. 5; cf. also Horkheimer, 1968, p. 118ff.), which reflects the underlying attempt to make teaching and learning scenarios more controllable and, in a sense, rationalizable.

That technical control is, in a sense, a utopian vision was illustrated by the practical challenges that arose from the widespread integration of digital media into teaching in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. In many cases, the use of digital tools led to disruptions: internet connections proved unstable, teachers and students were abruptly disconnected from breakout rooms, virtual flipcharts refused to open, and participants remained inaudible despite activated microphones, to name just a few problems (cf. Leineweber, Waldmann & Wunder, 2023, pp. 221f.). These experiences are somewhat at odds with the fact that educational institutions have traditionally been seen as places where the structural conditions are clear and unambiguous: fixed learning locations, times and content are designed to ensure that students can be guided through the learning process in a focused and disruption-free manner, based on pedagogically established relationships with their teachers.

The integration of digital media is causing unrest in educational institutions, even if it is based on an economic rationality that primarily aims at the efficient design of teaching and learning processes. In this context, the deployment of digital media within educational institutions serves as a manifestation of disenchantment, rooted in the paradox that individuals inhabit a world “produced daily through their own actions, yet one in which they fail to recognize themselves” (Schauer, 2023, p. 15; transl. from German into English by CL).

Social restriction of acting

Where digital media can act as potential disruptive factors, the concept of media literacy provides a media education framework for addressing such challenges. At its core, the term encompasses the ability to engage with media in a trained and reflective way, and positions this competence as a cornerstone of individual agency under digital conditions (cf. Iske & Barberi, 2022).

Individuals who are able to use media productively, creatively and critically are considered to be media literate. The concept of media literacy focuses primarily on the idea of a self-determined individual who acquires agency through competent action: those who demonstrate competence are successful in what they do. However, the performance aspect inherent in media literacy is significantly influenced by the effects of digital media and shapes our ability to act and judge. For example, the number of 'likes' and followers provides confirmation, search engine results and other algorithmic recommendations point to content that falls within our range of interests, a learning platform reliably assesses the performance level of learners, etc. In this context, (digital) data in particular promises to increase accuracy and certainty, which makes it "predestined [...] to play a prominent role in societies that see themselves as rational and enlightened" (Mau, 2018, p. 27; transl. from German into English by CL). It follows that digital media are not just tools that can be used competently or turned on and off at will, but that they actively transform our social world. This transformation becomes particularly evident when the use of digital media is shaped by economic competition aimed at achieving superior metrics (ibid., p. 26). A key factor driving this transformation is the profound significance of digital media in our lives. Their pervasive influence grants them a certain degree of control over us, enabling them to exert a qualitative impact on the way we live.

These are influences that can then lead to an "alienation" or a "loss of freedom" (Taylor, 1991, p. 10) when we produce media products in a media-literate way to gain likes and followers in the context of the attention economy, we rely on the recommendations of algorithms in the sense of a productive calculation without reflecting on them, when we increasingly base our assessment of student performance on learning platform measurements and thus accept a focus on learning output at the expense of the actual learning process, etc. These various influences cannot be reflected and criticized by dealing exclusively with the content and messages of the media and the competent handling of media objects, but rather require a self-reflective examination of the digital world in which we have all been living and continue to inhabit.

Conclusion

In the light of the above considerations, the structures of digital capitalism in media education contexts give rise to a perpetual performative contradiction: digital media promote and restrict individualization, they enable efficiency and generate disruptions, and their use requires us to be competent in the way we handle them, while at the same time they guide us and encourage us to adopt certain patterns of action and decisions.

While the scope of this article can only serve to stimulate further reflection and differentiation on the contradictions discussed, its relevance for a media education critique of digital capitalist structures lies in the realisation that these can only be effectively analysed and criticized if their inherent contradictions are fully understood. Accordingly, a media education critique of capitalism must first and foremost focus on addressing the contradictions of capitalism in the contexts and fields of action of media education.

Capitalism as a whole cannot be overcome by this, but it can be gradually transformed in the sense of media education by addressing its own limitations. Insofar as the emancipatory positioning against structural power and domination structures presupposed in their traditional Marxist idea the contestation of capitalism (cf. Jaeggi & Fraser, 2020, p. 165), digital capitalism is

currently arming itself with promises of technologically induced liberation. Understanding these promises of freedom in their fundamentally ambivalent structure and addressing them conceptually must be recognized as a central task of a contemporary and forward-looking media education.

This specific view of digital capitalism also offers a more differentiated perspective on the concept of diversity. Digital media reinforce individualization through their technical and social framework conditions and thus improve freedom of action with regard to different learning processes and ways of life. They promote spaces in which individualization is promoted as an idealized source that levels barriers and inequality. Individualization thus becomes a specific principle by which diversity can be promoted through digital media. Conversely, however, the same framework often exerts an externally determined influence on the individual actors: algorithms privilege certain types of content, reinforce prevailing norms and promote competition-oriented structures and behaviours. In short, when media are applied to the social world, their effects go beyond their technical instrumentality.

For media education, this means that diversity should not only be understood as an ideal, but also as a phenomenon that is being transformed by the digital transformation. In this sense, media education requires, among other things, a reflective examination of the inherent contradictions of digital capitalism. The focus on diversity can thus open up a critical perspective through which it can be examined how digital technologies promote certain forms of diversity while marginalising others. In this context, diversity goes beyond the question of autonomous aspects of digital society to also include the heteronomous power dynamics that are maintained, reconfigured and reproduced in digital spaces. Media education can play a crucial role in fostering the skills that individuals and groups need to challenge and critically engage with these dynamics and take an active role in shaping them.

The overarching aim is to consider digital spaces not only as representatives of social diversity, but also as potential sites for its enhancement and degradation – a perspective that can capture innovative forms of participation, inclusion and self-determination while critically interrogating the contradictions inherent in technological and capitalist systems.

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