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Educational approaches beyond digital capitalism. Final interim results of a practice-based research project on methods in media education[1]

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Abstract

This article focuses on the question of how young people in different educational settings can be methodically and didactically motivated to deal with digital capitalism. To this end, theoretical perspectives on digital capitalism, the positionality of (capitalism-)critical (political media) education and its seemingly apparent self-evidence are problematised in the first step. Next, "Critical Data Literacies – a practice-based research project on digital capitalism" is outlined. Its aim was to develop educational methods for interrogating different aspects of digital capitalism by fostering critical-aesthetic data literacies. The proposed methods have been tested with youth, students and educational professionals in Germany. Empirical results from the accompanying qualitative research are presented here to generate perspectives for comparable project contexts and deepening research.

Keywords: Digital capitalism, method development, accompanying research, youth, political

[1] This paper is a slightly revised translation of an article already published in German (Dander, 2024). It has been extended by excerpts of another text on the project (Dander, 2023). *DeepL translator* has been used for the translation: https://www.deepl.com. Additionally, I want to express my gratitude to my colleague and co-editor of this special issue, Lilli Riettiens, for her insightful and lucid feedback on this text, as well as to Natasha Kozul for her precise proofreading.

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media education

Introduction

“Digital capitalism” is characterised by its entanglement with multiple crisis phenomena. While varying analytical approaches with different and sometimes divergent focuses have been adopted in their examination, most are based on macro perspectives. Thus, a notable capability of abstraction is required to grasp, classify and evaluate the depth of connections, modes of operation and effects of “digital capitalism”. This is already a tremendous challenge for adult professionals engaged in academic or education-related activities. Therefore, it is crucial to consider ways in which young people (here: youth aged 14 and above) in various educational settings can be methodically encouraged to engage with the topic of digital capitalism. This issue is explored in this article and was the driving force behind the project “Critical Data Literacies – a practice-based research project on digital capitalism” that was carried out in 2022/2023 at the Clara Hoffbauer University of Applied Sciences Potsdam together with two students, Kelly Jane Urbanke and Lakisha Römer. The project was funded by the Hoffbauer Foundation with the aim of developing educational methods at the interface of digital capitalism and critical-aesthetic data literacies. These methods were initially tested with young people, students and educational professionals, and were subsequently revised based on their feedback and our accompanying research, as we were also interested in what they gained from these methodically-guided workshop units. Finally, we published the methods under a free licence.

Although the project was not very successful in its outreach to diverse participants in non-formal educational settings, it might inform similar initiatives. To aid in this process, some empirically grounded insights into potential challenges and shortcomings are outlined in this article.

In the following section, some basic concepts on digital capitalism that informed the project context are defined. I then present data on the attitudes and stances of adults and young people in Germany to raise questions about the positioning of critical education on digital capitalism and the conflictual nature of apparent self-evident facts. The context of the method development and practical research project is outlined in Section 3, cursory empirical results are presented in Section 4, and the article concludes with Section 5, where the key findings and desiderata for the mutual theory–practice transfer and comparable project contexts are outlined.

Freedom, equality, solidarity and criticism of capitalism in educational work

Depending on the perspective on so-called “digital capitalism”, different focal points and dimensions of the phenomenon come to the fore. These selected approaches reveal one thing above all: the phenomenon is very comprehensive and complex. It is therefore an almost unmanageable challenge (whether in theory or educational practice) to do justice to this complexity.

In what follows, a few examples will be used to show that the theoretical and conceptual tailoring can result in considerable differences in perspective. Shoshana Zuboff's concept of “surveillance capitalism”, which she develops in her widely cited book (Zuboff, 2019), focuses on commercial

surveillance and exploitation of personal data streams, particularly by social media and other big tech corporations. In doing so, she takes the somewhat previously virulent debate about big data analytics a step further in terms of its economic embedding and—after the role of state agencies such as intelligence services has been intensely debated, following the Snowden leaks—shifts the focus back to private-sector entities, namely companies as the "Big Other" (Zuboff, 2015). Zuboff is therefore primarily interested in the connection between personal digital data and its private-sector exploitation.

A few years later, Philipp Staab published a book entitled "Digital Capitalism" ("Digitaler Kapitalismus", Staab, 2019) in which, among other things, he explored what he calls "proprietary markets". Staab uses this term to describe the tendency for large IT companies to market proprietary products in a monopoly-like manner and thus operate relatively successfully. Staab further argues that these companies with their app stores, or the Google group Alphabet with its combination of search engine and advertising sales, create their own highly controllable and controlled markets. Their practices are therefore at least partially removed from public control. "As market owners, they [the leading companies of the commercial internet; V.D.] monitor who gains access to the market in growing areas of the economy and under what conditions this happens (access control)" (ibid., p. 223). This supremacy is translated into additional returns. Staab describes this development as both "empirically unfinished" and "historically significant" (ibid., p. 224). In his book "The Power of Platforms" ("Die Macht der Plattformen", Seemann, 2021), Michael Seemann outlines a perspective and analysis similar to this diagnosis, although he develops a more general heuristic for platform power that extends far beyond this form of access control to (online) markets.

A slightly different view of platforms is proposed by Nick Srnicek, who coined the term "platform capitalism" (Srnicek, 2016). This notion describes, for instance, companies as lean platforms that merely mediate between providers and consumers without (at least primarily) offering their own services. Examples of this mode of operation include services such as Airbnb, Uber or various mediation platforms for domestic help etc. Detailed analyses of other examples are provided by Moritz Altenried, who draws upon this anthology to argue that these platform companies generate a certain amount of income, even if in many cases they are unprofitable (Altenried et al., 2021). The speculative prospect of conquering the markets and displacing other market participants and supply models from these markets, but also collecting valuable usage data, carries the investment risk (Altenried 2021, p. 52, 55). Based on Srnicek's and other works, Altenried suggests taking the "platformisation of infrastructure" and the "infrastructurisation of platforms" in particular as the starting point for analysis. This refers to a transformation taking place beyond individual companies, which has a noticeable impact on other areas of society, such as democracy, social reproduction or geopolitics, whereby risks are transferred to workers, states and societies.

I would like to provide a final perspective for these cursory insights by referring to the work of sociologist Sabine Pfeiffer, especially her book "Digitization as a Distributive Force" (Pfeiffer, 2022). Although the subtitle asks what is "new about digital capitalism", she tends to reject the term. Pfeiffer justifies this stance by stating that much of the so-called "digital capitalism" is still essentially capitalist, and that the explanatory power of a political economy interpretation is therefore equally, if not more, relevant than that of technology-driven interpretations (ibid., p. 20f.). Her work is highly relevant insofar as it embeds those phenomena that often stand alone in

other analyses in macroeconomic contexts: “If Facebook or Google, as we know [...], generate incredible revenues from advertising alone – then there must also be companies that are willing to spend this money” (ibid., p. 22). Her central thesis is that the most significant influence of digital technologies on the capitalist economy is not located in the production of value, but rather in its realisation. Pfeiffer uses the concept “distributive forces”—as distinct from productive forces—to describe aspects such as advertising and marketing, transportation and storage, control and forecasting, arguing that all these measures and activities are intended to “delay the inevitable next crisis” (ibid., p. 26).

These four analytical approaches to the phenomenon or concept of “digital capitalism” already show marked divergence in their focal points. They range from data exploitation (Zuboff) to the control of online markets (Staab) and the operation of more or less lean platforms in general (Srnicek) to the distributive forces described as a partial aspect of a globally dominant capitalist economy that still functions as usual beyond the influence of digital technologies. This picture becomes even more complex, if positions are included that go beyond this infra/structural level by elaborating on the level of agency (of users, workers, citizens etc.). These works too exist in various shades (see, for example, Schaupp, 2021; Scholz, 2022).

In view of some of the numerous academic analyses of digital capitalism or the commercial exploitation of personal digital data, the question of evaluation and normative positioning always seems to be already answered. The exploitation of people, nature or even countries of the so-called Global South, the monopolisation of central goods and infrastructures, the erosion of democratic structures and the resurgence of autocratic modes of rule etc. contradict the fundamental values of human coexistence in civic societies—such as freedom, equality and solidarity or participation, inclusion and diversity—and therefore need to be rejected (Carstensen et al., 2023, Crawford, 2021, Dander et al., 2021, Hintz et al., 2018).

For the majority of critical (as well as less critical) academics and media educators, it might be readily apparent that these tendencies and processes should be criticised, stopped and reversed for this reason. Insofar as research and educational efforts can contribute to this endeavour, these normative categories are at least indirectly translated into educational goals, albeit often more latently than emphatically and in a manifest way, or they are deemed to be set.

However, these attitudes cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, recent data illustrates just how controversial opinions on related matters are among the German population. Results of the latest study on group-focused enmity by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation show a far from homogeneous picture of political attitudes among German adults (Zick et al., 2023). For example, one in five of the survey participants largely or completely agree with the national chauvinist statement that “the primary goal of German politics should be to give Germany the power and prestige it deserves” (Zick & Mokros 2023b, p. 64f.)[2]. Social Darwinist statements such as “As in nature, the strongest should always prevail in society” are still supported by around 10% of respondents. Around an eighth of the sample agrees with the assessment that even today “the influence of the Jews is too great” (ibid.), and 35% somewhat or fully agree that “the long-term unemployed [make] a comfortable life for themselves at the expense of society” (Zick & Mokros, 2023a, p.

[2] Quotes from references in German are translated to English throughout this paper.

160f.). These findings indicate that the fragility and failure of capitalist, market-oriented promises in the form of neoliberal ideologies lead to a libertarian-authoritarian, democracy-endangering "potential for protest and violence" (Groß et al., 2023, p. 245) rather than to an increased criticism of capitalism:

> "In particular, perceived experiences of crisis and the associated loss of security are causing those identified with success and achievement to drift towards the authoritarian and illiberal, especially in the centre of society. Overall, just under 20% of the German population is a rabidly market-libertarian group. The people in question show little solidarity with those who do not live up to the neoliberal calls for success. Their idea of freedom is limited to their own freedom for self-development; consideration for others is secondary at best." (ibid., p. 256f.)

The topic of climate change is also known to be extremely controversial. This applies both to basic assumptions about its factuality and man-made nature as well as (even if there is agreement on these points) to its political and social consequences and action steps. More than half of those surveyed agree somewhat or completely with the following statement: "Instead of climate protection, we need to promote technologies for adapting to climate change." More than 20% of respondents even agree with the statement that climate protection is "eco-terrorism against the population" (Reusswig & Küpper, 2023, p. 294ff.).

If we turn to the results of the 2019 Shell Youth Study, we see equally mixed findings. The authors classify a quarter of the German 15- to 25-year-olds surveyed as being inclined towards (right-wing) populism based on their racist and conspiracy-minded attitudes, and 9% as national populists (Schneekloth & Albert, 2020, p. 80ff.).[3]

Likewise, there are considerable approval ratings among those aged 12–25 for individual conservative to right-wing orientations: "Asserting oneself and one's own needs against others" is important to 48% of respondents (while 24% rated it as not important; in 2015, it was important to 56%) and "Having power and influence" is important to 32% of the sample. In contrast, 15% of participants stated that it was not important to them to "[help] socially disadvantaged and marginalised groups" (62% stated it was important to them) and 12% did not consider it important to "[behave] in an environmentally conscious manner under all circumstances" (71% rated it as important; Schneekloth, 2020, p. 109).

What purpose do these statements on right-wing and conservative attitudes among adults and young people serve in the context of the current discussion? The main point is to show that making digital-capitalist relations the content and subject of education is a major challenge on various levels, beyond their degree of complexity and abstraction, and that it also involves targeting (capitalism-)critical goals. First, it must be assumed that even basic, fact-based

[3] In spring 2024, a trend study among 14- to 29-year-olds in Germany showed an increasing affinity for the right-wing party Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD). See https://simon-schnetzer.com/blog/jugend-in-deutschland-2024-veroeffentlichung-der-trendstudie/ [accessed on 30.05.2024]. Despite methodological criticism of the study, it confirms certain right-wing sentiments in the younger age segment. For criticism, see https://netzpolitik.org/2024/online-umfragen-repraesentativitaet-und-realitaet/ [accessed on 30.05.2024].

assumptions (can) provoke dissent—for example, about the ecological damage caused by our (capitalist) economy. Second, educators cannot count on the "self-evidence" or an "automatism" of empathy, solidarity or indignation as a reaction to injustice, exploitation or the destruction of nature. Attitudes of inequality and ideologies of neoliberalism are so deeply rooted in parts of the population that the responsibility for a particular socio-economic position can be attributed to individuals or (in a negative sense) to groups as a matter of course. You are poor and have a low-paid job? Well, that's your own fault. In the same vein, the concern about the deterioration of one's own situation tips over into anti-Semitic, racist, national-chauvinist resentment whereby the Jews, the migrants, the refugees—i.e. "the others"—are to blame. The ethical-normative assessment of facts therefore diverges considerably—sometimes with conservative assessments within the framework of the constitution and human rights, often enough outside of it. Third, there is the question of legitimacy of educational interventions and offers. While working towards a pluralistic, democratic coexistence on the basis of the constitution against misanthropic sentiments in the democratic spectrum should be considered unproblematic (Lösch, 2022, p. 138; Wohnig & Zorn, 2022, p. 10), emphatic persuasion for positions critical of capitalism in settings of (political/civic) media education would not be widely consensual and acceptable. Incentives, impulses and inspiration can be offered for the individual positioning (or rethinking) of those participating in educational settings. However, positioning themselves in a certain way cannot and must not be taken away from them, imposed on them or made a compulsory or examination task to be fulfilled. In this respect, considerations from the field of (critical) political education prove to be fruitful:

> "Individuals should understand and reflect on the conditions in which they are integrated on a daily basis and be able to place their own actions and ways of thinking in a social context. [...] Acting means more than reproducing the existing. [...] Action refers not only to individual behaviour (values, democracy, consumer education), but also means 'relating' to the world, to general human affairs. As with the extended power of judgment, the individual, cooperation and the common come together here. This would then also be the criterion for the didactic-methodical setting." (Lösch, 2016, p. 229)

The conclusions that Sabine Achour draws from the results of the aforementioned study on group-focused enmity in relation to political (and economic) education can be interpreted in a similar way. The results could be

> "interpreted in terms of the contradictions between capitalism (neoliberal meritocracy) and democracy. With competition, profit maximisation and rivalry, the former leads to social inequalities, dependencies, poverty and feelings of loneliness, which can be detrimental to democracy [...]. Democracy, on the other hand, promises participation, freedom, self-determination and the shaping of society." (Achour, 2023, p. 371)

Accordingly, Achour advocates "(capitalism-)critical political education" (ibid.). With regard to climate protection, political education for sustainable development is also required, which must work and deal with "ambivalences, dilemmas, controversies and conflicting goals" (ibid.). It is precisely in the "conflictuality" and "controversial nature of action strategies" that she recognises great potential for educational approaches (ibid., p. 375; see also Grünberger & Dander, 2024).

Similar to Achour's plea for political education work with ambivalences, dilemmas and controversies, Bettina Lösch calls for "[c]reative, experience-based, irritating approaches" in order to multiply perspectives instead of narrowing them. For Lösch, "[q]uestioning and avoiding binaries and polarisations" as well as the courage and willingness to dissent are also key dimensions for successful, open (political) educational processes" (ibid.). With these approaches in mind, the next section focuses on very practical experiences and challenges at developing suitable educational methods for youth work.

Contexts: Media education methods for a critique of digital capitalism

In the short duration of 13 months, the objectives of the project "Critical Data Literacies – a practical research project on digital capitalism" were largely achieved. The project team first conducted thematic analyses of the subject area, categorising and evaluating subtopics in the field in terms of their interrelationships and their relevance to young people's lives. At the same time, existing materials on these subtopics were reviewed and analysed for gaps or possible connections. In this way, the original ideas for the thematic structure of the project were revised and reduced. From an original, very broad subdivision into capitalist data economies, (anti-Semitic) conspiracy narratives as a misled critique of (data) capitalism and creative data aesthetics, three narrower thematic fields and corresponding methods were developed:

1. *Visualise a Data Stream* – a creative engagement with everyday data and collective, synthetically visualised image stories
2. *Feeding the Feed* – a collective reflection on the socio-technical composition of (image-based) social media feeds, and
3. *Wild Cats & Hot Dogs* – a game-based method on labour struggles in a platform capitalist food delivery company.[4]

These methods were primarily developed for extracurricular, non-formal educational contexts in youth work, but could also be used in other settings, such as at schools, in media education training for professionals etc. In this context, aspects such as low-threshold and engaging participants in interaction and activity (instead of frontal instruction) were particularly important to us. Further important dimensions and "guiding principles" of our approach were (Dander, 2023):

Clustering and reducing topics and objectives: In the early stages of the project, the thematic strands were broken down and clustered together, the materials were reviewed (although not systematically evaluated) and points of intersection were sought. In the course of this process, it

[4] The methods are available on the website of the "Initiative Bildung und digitaler Kapitalismus" (an initiative in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, working on education and digital capitalism): https://bildung-und-digitaler-kapitalismus.de/plattformen-daten-und-ki-methoden-fuer-die-paedagogische-medienarbeit-mit-jugendlichen/ [accessed on 30.05.2024].

became clear that linking thematic areas entails the difficulty of not being able to do justice to individual topics.

Sustainability and openness to old and new in the development process: Gaining overview of existing materials also had the function of inscribing our own work in an overarching professional landscape of approaches, methods and materials and contributing to it without creating unnecessary redundancies. One of "our" methods, Visualise a Data Stream, consisted of the translation, modification and expansion of an existing method that was previously available in English and Spanish (Lewis et al., 2018). We could work with it, since it is published under a free licence (CC BY 4.0 Int.). By using free licences ourselves, we seek to contribute to a common and ongoing process of creating and refining such materials.

Simple media technology setup: In order to be usable in as many different educational contexts and situations as possible, as well as beneficial for less tech-savvy educators, it was important to us to keep the technical requirements simple. Visualise a Data Stream works with an image-generating AI system (in our case DALL-E 2; it can be a different one), for the use of which a free account with the manufacturer OpenAI was required as of June 2023. Otherwise, analogue materials such as moderation cards, printed pictures, a board game and the like are used. In all cases, the focus is on joint discussions and reflection with the participants.

Modularisation: With the intention of allowing as many different application scenarios as possible, we have endeavoured to be able to apply the methods in manageable, reduced variants. In addition, however, we also offer extensions that allow for in-depth study and connections in different directions. At the beginning of the conception phase, we planned the three methods in a way so that they could be integrated into one workshop concept. While the methods on data streams and the Instagram feed—both dealing with questions of social media, data, privacy and publicity—can be combined more easily, the topic of platform capitalism is somewhat off the beaten track and cannot be connected seamlessly to the other two methods.

Empathising with different subject positions and thinking in relations: The principle of proximity to the lifeworld was central to the choice of topic and concept in order to be able to establish relevance for young participants in the first place (Rösch, 2017). At the same time, a sole reduction to the lifeworlds of the presumed participants results in a possible restriction of the angle of vision. If, for instance, none of the people present have worked as a food delivery person, this horizon of experience is missing in the discussion of food delivery services. Such experiential gaps were countered by playing characters, aiming at a diversification of perspectives.

In terms of working with digital data and social media posts, we refrained from using authentic material from the participants as, beyond the moment of empathy and role reversal, their privacy and the corresponding pedagogical safe space play a central role.

Emphasise collective moments and the ability to shape rules: A strong focus on powerful structures can easily lead to a feeling of powerlessness, leaving individuals with only resignation instead of options for action. Accordingly, at least two methods involve collective action. In this way, it should be possible for participants to appreciate that structural logics, routines, powerful apparatuses and sedimented "rules of the game" are not unchangeable, but can be shaped through collective effort. Within the board game Wild Cats & Hot Dogs in particular, the participants are consciously given utopian scope that goes beyond the realistic.

Avoiding pitfalls: As a matter of principle, in the project context, we endeavoured to avoid the following impending pitfalls as far as possible:

- Targeting educational measures on complex topics at young people from homes with higher economic and cultural capital, e.g. to generate more successful outcomes or evaluation results
- Introducing complex topics predominantly frontally and at a theoretical, abstract level
- To induce a feeling of powerlessness, despite insights into a structurally oriented critique of capitalism and a reflection on "powerful surveillance capitalist structures"
- To impose on the participants one specific perspective of assessing and addressing digital capitalist structures and practices

Empirically supported evaluation of the practice-oriented project

The accompanying research on our method development with limited time and resources relied on the pragmatic means of empirical social research. This methodological decision influenced the choice of methods, the number of implementations and the sampling system, as well as the number of iterations in the interplay of method conception, revision and feedback in the test runs. We decided to run semi-structured focus groups with participants and transcribe the records. Additionally, the team members crafted protocols of the test runs. All data was coded according to the coding paradigm of grounded theory methodology (Strübing, 2014).

In two cases, all three methods were tested in parallel. The first evaluation involved the media education community (mainly working as educators, partly as scholars in academia) present at the Forum for Communication Culture (Forum Kommunikationskultur) of the Professional Association for Media Education and Communication Culture (Gesellschaft für Medienpädagogik und Kommunikationskultur, GMK) 2022 in Potsdam. The second sample comprised eighth-grade pupils (mostly aged 13 or 14 years) attending a comprehensive school in an urban area. An initial test run of the Feeding the Feed method took place with first-year social work students. In all cases, reflective discussions were held afterwards. Focus group discussions with the pupils and students centred on their prior knowledge and reflective experiences of content and methodology. The exchanges were recorded, transcribed and analysed. Systematic ethnographic research of the implementation had to be dispensed with, as did implementation in open youth work facilities as,

despite numerous requests, it was not possible to summon up suitable participant groups via youth centers. The following project results should therefore be understood as explorative and incomplete—and as a mandate for a research-based, practice-oriented deepening.

Overall, when participating in the *Feeding the Feed* test run, the students were much more open to the thematic issues raised than the pupils. Some students explicitly expressed "consumer criticism" with regard to their own social media use and used a vocabulary that echoes addiction discourses ("get away from it"). While certain mechanisms of socio-technical curation of feeds were known to the participants (paid posts and personalised advertising, relevance of their own interactions with content), their assessments varied. In one case, for example, paid posts were considered "okay" if companies were known to be "doing something good." However, inappropriate content would lead to negative emotions such as anger. Personal contribution to social media feeds (overall or of others) was described as restrained, especially with regard to political content. One participant stated a preference for discussing political topics with a direct counterpart. Another person was more likely to share political content that concerned them personally, that could establish a direct connection and would allow identification. Emotional reactions to political content were also reflected upon and qualified as justified (e.g. anger about grievances). Another person emphasised that, despite all the ambivalence, social media could also have a positive side, for example when beautiful, homemade things are shared.

In the school setting, all three methods were tested in parallel. Therefore, pupils had to choose one of them. The participants who opted for the *Feeding the Feed* method (remarkably, this included all of the seemingly female pupils) showed an even stronger personal connection to their social media usage behaviour in the subsequent reflections (in addition to interest in familiar people and stars). One girl made a clear distinction between two types of content: content that she likes and shares because she can also be seen on it, or "boring" visual content (e.g. on Instagram, that only shows another person "posing"). Formulated somewhat more abstractly, it could be said that, at least in this case, a relationship logic (the common is in the foreground in content and is shared) was preferred to a more individual and self-centred attention economy.

The role of algorithms for the selection and sorting of content in the feed was mentioned relatively generally, as shown in this example: "I think it just made you more aware, um, that there is an algorithm that observes, okay, um, [...] what you like to look at." Here, as at other points in the conversations with the students, the impression arose that social desirability played a major role: showing what is already known about the subject matter (without going into more detail), giving positive feedback to satisfy an instructor or naming commonplaces. This insight makes critical comments on the method all the more important, which consisted, for example, of assessing the positioning in the room in response to certain visual content as "annoying" or suggesting a use of short video content in the style of TikTok.

In the focus group discussion on the first method, *Visualise a Data Stream*, only a few participants—exclusively seemingly boys—expressed their views. The overall mood could be characterised by ironic restraint, which was also explicitly expressed in some comments. Here, too, there were general statements on a wide range of topics: "[B]ecause I found it particularly exciting, for example, as already mentioned, the information and so on or how the data is handled." Accordingly, the participant articulates a personal take-away message: "Read through data protection guidelines" although this was never mentioned during the whole test run. Even if

the use of an image-generating “AI” such as DALL-E 2 was perceived as exciting, the participants' assessment of a potential change in future media use was rather negative.

The third method, the board game *Wild Cats & Hot Dogs*, was only chosen by two students, only one of whom wanted to take part in the subsequent discussion. The feedback on the game itself (i.e. its design and mechanics) was rather positive. In terms of content, however, it could not perceptibly connect to the experiences and lifeworld of a 13- to 14-year-old; the labour disputes surrounding food delivery services as a platform company remained abstract and intangible.

Lessons learned, problems unsolved

Based on the feedback and experiences shared by our participants and our reflections as a project team, we have learned some valuable lessons about the conceptualisation process. The fit among the target group, educational context, learning or educational objectives and method design is key to successful learning outcomes. Educational professionals also pointed out during the test run in 2022 that low-threshold and proximity to the participants' lifeworld to enable interest, motivation and in-depth discussion was not sufficiently taken into account. The fact that it was possible to win over a youth group for a test only within school context might be due to an overly strong emphasis on school-like topics and methods. Nevertheless, the time available for this implementation—just under two school hours—was too short to go into more depth with the young people, to gain insights into their daily media use, to provide them with some more basic information on the subject matter, to get into relationship building or to try out two or even all three of the methods.

This also blurred the distinction between the reflective discussion on data and digital capitalist relations as part of the method and the reflections on learnings and the method itself within the focus groups. As the project team, we found that our methods were not adequately designed for students aged around 13 or 14 years. We thus concurred that it would be interesting to run them with slightly older youth aged 16 and older, especially in voluntary educational settings. The methods could be used for work with multipliers and prospective educational professionals, even if this does not correspond to the original goal.

While the *Feeding the Feed* method met with relatively great interest and triggered the most intensive reflections among the participants, the content of these reflections remained close to the immediate worlds of experience and hardly touched on the questions of digital capitalism. Conversely, the *Wild Cats & Hot Dogs* method operated with a familiar game scenario and thus benefitted from the potential for gamification, whereby the “broccoli” (the unwieldy topic), although very explicitly named and included in the story, was covered by “chocolate” (the game setting) (Breuer, 2016). It seems that the broccoli was not really digested, even if it was stated that its chocolate cover tasted good.

Therefore, the following problem remains unresolved: The concepts presented—already perceived by experts as too didactic for non-school, non-formal educational spaces—can hardly convey fundamental connections among digital technologies, digital cultures and digital capitalism as knowledge and experience. Hence, working within given, short frameworks does not even approach questions of positionality, controversial and dissensual political debate or, closely related to this, political options for action. We have not come across emphatic controversial statements (e.g. in favour of the exploitation of workers, personal data and nature) possibly due to

the urban milieu and rather liberal backgrounds of pupils and students. Test runs might deliver more challenging results, if conducted with participants in rural areas or with a different, e.g. right-wing family background. Therefore, even though the project has come to an end within the funded framework, central questions on making abstract societal conditions accessible to young, heterogeneous and diverse target groups remain open and need to be addressed. By making the methods themselves as well as the considerations and reflections in the background transparent and reusable, the ongoing work on answering these questions can and must be continued as a joint open process.

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