

Neoliberal Digitalism?

Review of Susanne Gaschke , *Klick - Strategien gegen die digitale Verdummung*.
Herder, Freiburg: 2009.

By Dennis Deicke

Susanne Gaschke's book *Klick - Strategies Against Digital Stultification* describes how the increasing prevalence of the internet and new media influences the culture of knowledge and education. She criticizes an infinite optimism of media, politics and science towards this phenomenon and decries an uncritical handling of the internet. Gaschke characterizes people following the paradigm of new media blindly as ideologists; she calls them 'digitalists.' Furthermore, a criticism of modern neoliberal capitalism accompanies her fundamental demand for more pessimism towards the new media.

Susanne Gaschke, a journalist writing for the German weekly *DIE ZEIT*, admits that she might be biased due to her profession in an old medium like a newspaper. To Gaschke, the ability to read is the most necessary competence in a modern society: „who reads, learns thinking“. But the digitalists have chosen a new ability to be crucial for a working society: media competence. Gaschke does not assert that media literacy is unimportant but she insists that being able to read still is the core competence, which enables other abilities. Thus she criticizes the unconsidered support of new media in all parts of life, especially in the educational system. Schools and kindergartens are supplied with computers, networks and software by the IT-industry. Politics accept it, knowing that corporations like Microsoft do not equip schools because of limitless altruism, but to tie customers to their brand, at a very young age.

Referring to Nicholas Carr's article *Is Google Making Us Stupid?*, Susanne Gaschke claims that internet use has changed the way we perceive and consume texts and media. Similar to Carr she points out that pace and restlessness have altered our patterns of cognition. The internet conditions the user to search for short texts he can browse briefly and superficially. For both Carr and Gaschke this results in a severe threat to the ability of concentrating.

Susanne Gaschke holds the view that the digitalists are not open for any forms of critique of the new technology. She insists that fighting against new technological trends is always difficult, and quotes Adorno who already pointed out that criticizing new technologies is like fighting against the world spirit.

For Susanne Gaschke the group of digitalists is composed of the IT-industry, online service providers, media scientists, journalists and users. They all celebrate the beginning of a new era for mankind beginning with new media. Gaschke does not believe in all the hopes and promises linked with the digital world. She rejects aspirations concerning democratization and emancipation resulting in a politically functioning publicity, which emerged in beginning of the 90's. Gaschke points out that new media are not used to gain politically important information. Mainly it is used for entertainment, to pass time and to consume products. That is where media pedagogy enters the discussion and claims to be the discipline teaching people how to use the internet. But for Gaschke this is not the main problem; she worries about the continuing distraction generated by the ubiquitous new media, which are available everywhere and anytime.

Gaschke warns the reader not to believe in the promises made by the digitalists. For Gaschke it is clear that the internet will not solve social problems, it will not close social gaps and it will not cause the emergence of a perfect society. She uses studies exemplifying that internet users do not read, but browse over websites briefly. Thus, she concludes, the perfect image of an overall informed, critical internet user does not exist often in reality. The problem of the youth is not the lack of access to information. The issue is that the ever-increasing digitalization has taken away their ability to understand and read things as a whole. Through the internet, people just do not have to read attentively anymore, because they have the belief they can find everything on the net. This notion of having information and knowledge anytime within a reachable distance is a threat to knowledge and education. Following this principle, adolescents are taught to get information easily and with few effort in the internet. Gaschke depicts this practice as a neglect of duty in education. She raises the question what will happen if everyone relies on the principle of *finding* rather than *knowing*. For me this is a core question in the whole debate Gaschke starts: if everyone relies on search engines results, who is the person making sense of all the information that is found?

Further more, Gaschke points out the digitalists' belief that all information on the internet can be treated equally. For Gaschke this ends up in egalitarianism. Her view is that society depends on hierarchical structures of knowledge, which are rejected consistently by the digitalists. She admits that the internet offers opportunities to inform oneself beyond the things learned in school or from journalism. But at least, and I think Gaschke is right, the society needs a certain consensus about the things that are important to know. Another important aspect Gaschke states is that society always has to rely on experts. The digitalists believe that knowledge structures and hierarchies disappear because of the access to information through the internet. But as Gaschke exemplifies it: If I want orthopaedic advice, I want to get it from an orthopaedist and not from somebody who knows what an orthopaedist does, and posted it on Wikipedia.

Another interesting topic mentioned by Susanne Gaschke concerns the distinction between adulthood and childhood, which is fading away due to the use of new media. Referring to Neil Postman, Gaschke holds the view that adults are keepers of secrets which are slowly revealed to children during the process of growing up. But the extensive use of the internet by children changes this situation, because they are confronted with the secrets not mediated by their parents: „The digital culture cannot deal with symbolic secrets which are meaningful for the process of growing up“. Here she traceably argues that this confrontation can obviously happen too early, and confuse children more than it enlightens them. A further aspect mentioned by Susanne Gaschke is that new media simultaneously change adults and convert them to children again. The internet looses the adult's self restrictions, characterizing adulthood, and enhances accommodating the inner drives, which eventually results in clicking. She wants to prove this process of adults mutating to children by using figures that demonstrate that the age of people playing computer has risen. Thus they become more like children, because playing video games is for children. But I think the higher level of age is mainly a consequence of the former video-gaming kids becoming older and keeping on playing, not a result of older people suddenly starting to play computer games.

Additionally, Susanne Gaschke questions the usefulness and the concept of Web 2.0. She admits that the web offers the opportunity of connecting scientists and enabling exchange of

knowledge, but she is critical of terms like 'wisdom of the crowds' or 'peer production,' because the basis of these principles should be expertise, which is not always prevalent in the Web 2.0. She consults the Condorcet Theorem (referring to the French philosopher Marquis de Condorcet), which says that groups are able to take better and exacter decisions, but only under the conditions that at least one half of the group has the necessary knowledge. Otherwise the group's decision will be terribly wrong. In addition, she criticizes the quality and the necessity of contributions in the Web 2.0. She questions if it is a benefit that everyone can publish his views on something, even if they are untrue or inciting. But I am of the opinion that this is not an online problem in most instances. Web 2.0 just mediates information and is not the origin of certain problematic views or contributions. It is just a new way of distribution; shielding Web 2.0 from becoming a successful channel for extremists is mainly a task of society, which should generally prevent people from following dangerous ideas. She also decries the enhancing influence of the internet on phenomena like happy slapping (slap other people and film it with the cell phone) or rampages, because the internet provides the protagonists with an audience. But I believe that blaming new media for events like that is not adequate, they just make these things more visible but do not cause them. Another terrible example she mentions concerns the case of Abraham Biggs who began suicide and broadcasted his death over the internet in 2008 and none of the viewers called emergency, they watched him die. Gaschke admits that the internet was not the reason of the suicide, but it gave him the chance to broadcast it live. But again, an absence of the internet would not have avoided his death; it just would not have been that visible.

Moreover she argues that the blog culture does not result in a open discourse which eventually produces the completely enlightened unified community. Miriam Meckel (communication scientist, St. Gallen) believes that in Weblogs the users develop the synthesis as a result of discussing thesis and anti-thesis. But Gaschke rejects that by citing an American study showing that 90 percent of references made by blogs, are links to other blogs that have nearly the same opinion, so they are more likely to be echo rooms than areas of balanced discussions.

Furthermore, she criticizes social networks for being platforms of self-profiling. People use it to show who they are and to find acceptance and recognition. But Gaschke is of the opinion

that this produces a false image, especially for adolescents who believe that friends can be found easily on the web without real-life investments. For her, the demand for online relations and friendships is just a consequence of a lack of social contacts in reality, but those cannot be replaced that easily, because the virtual relations will never be as intense as the real ones.

As a print journalist, Gaschke is consistently arguing against the substitution of newspapers through online news. The main reason to keep them is that newspapers are initially consumed as a whole; they confront the reader with information and opinions he does not (want to) know. The customization of news on the internet destroys this process. Another fundamental problem Gaschke identifies is the lack of quality in online news. Online news is cheaper to produce but generates the same amount of advertising revenue and thus the quality suffers. For Gaschke another reason for the inferiority of online news is that they often rely on user-generated content and exploit bloggers, who work for free and often do not have the expertise of a journalist. She might be right with this point, but I would avoid the term of exploitation, because nobody forces users to give away their produced material.

A fundamental aspect of Gaschke's book is that she consequently links her criticism of new media with criticism of today's form of capitalism. To her, the new culture caused by the internet is just the logical outcome of neoliberal capitalism that has reigned over the past decades. Throughout the years neo-liberalism has altered society. Flexibility became the crucial credo for people who wanted to function properly in the modern 'knowledge society,' which is a neoliberal propaganda term in Gaschke's eyes. Her interesting opinion is that new media force us to be even more flexible, so flexible that we might lose the last carryover of necessary stability. The mentioned mutation from adults to children again is just a wish of capitalism, because they are the better consumers, they do not contain themselves. The neoliberal paradigm has desocialized and fragmented society by forcing people to become flexible and restless, always ready to focus on something 'new.' These attributes are now converted to internet culture and enhanced by new media simultaneously. Gaschke even sees the desire for relationships in social networks as a consequence of the neoliberal system. People search online because neo-liberalism produced an unstable society, which lacks real, intense relations. And she gives a very absorbing explanation for digitalists being ideological: before the collapse of the Soviet Union capitalism did not need to be ideological,

because the alternative system was not successful. But after the fall of the Soviet Union the alternative disappeared and flexible capitalism created an ideology strongly conjoined with technology: new media will provide everyone with knowledge, information and prosperity. „This ideology leaves a few winners, a considerable group of losers and a big stack of pancake-personalities, which do not flourish in the chaos but stretch out to all directions“, Gaschke says. But one can just turn this argument upside down and assert that because of the system, alternative capitalism was ideological and does not have to be it anymore. To Gaschke, the digitization is just an additional instrument of rationalization; she finds proof of this in the computer-based economic increase, which resulted in a decrease of 130,000 jobs in the media sector in the United States.

Susanne Gaschke's work is an interesting and alarming book, urging the reader to question the whole hype in regards of new media. She makes plenty of interesting points that are often not taken into consideration when the influence of new media is discussed. I share her opinion that we should not glorify the internet as the new instrument to create a reasonable and informed society, without necessary investments in real education. But since she is a journalist, her critique often is polemical and her arguments could be discussed in a more balanced way.

German Wikipedia page about Susanne Gaschke:
http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susanne_Gaschke

A link to Nicholas Carr's article „Is Google Making Us Stupid?“:
<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200807/google>

Wikipedia page about the philosopher Marquis de Condorcet:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marquis_de_Condorcet

Homepage about Gaschke's book from the publisher Herder:
http://www.herder.de/buecher/gesellschaft_politik/detailseiten/29996_Klick/details?k_tnr=29996&par_onl_struktur=1573791&onl_struktur=0&sort=3&query_start=&tb=0&titel=Klick