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# Digital Citizenship Education

Challenge and Opportunity

**Steve Kenner** and **Dirk Lange**

Digital citizenship poses new challenges for citizenship education. In the literature and research on citizenship education in Germany, this field currently only plays a marginal role, although it becomes more and more important to discuss both the inclusive and exclusive aspects of digitization.

In the following, we will develop the link between digital transformation and citizenship education by means of some questions and theses. We also illustrate the potentials of a Digital Citizenship Education.

This includes the examination of power structures and relations, and how they shift due to the digital transformation. Nowadays, people have to be able to recognize how power relations are represented in the digital world – whether through the shift of economic structures (for example advertising) or political activities (for example election campaigns) (Kenner and Lange, 2020). Digital Citizenship Education has to put the issue of «power» into the context of knowledge hierarchies and access to information.

Digital Citizenship Education promotes the maturity, in a Kantian sense, of citizens in the digital world. The requirements for this are (Kenner, 2020):

1. technical skills as a prerequisite for the reflective use of digital media;
2. digital orientation competences to move in the new political spheres;
3. digital evaluation skills to be able to critically reflect on the new constellations of power and authority;

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4. digital participation skills in order to articulate and represent your own interests on the Internet.

Based on this understanding of Digital Citizenship Education, we will discuss digitization as a challenge but also as an opportunity for citizenship education. The following examples serve to illustrate this area of tension: (1) the transformation of public and private spheres in the digital world (2) the digital divides and (3) the power of algorithms.

## **1. The transformation of public and private spheres in the digital world**

In the digital age, the concept of the public sphere needs to be redefined. Media scientist Caja Thimm (2016a) points out that the digitization of society has led to a categorical change of the public sphere and the private sphere. This can be primarily traced back to the rise of internet communication. The traditional public sphere was shaped by journalistic research and selection processes. It has been replaced by an interconnected public sphere in which human beings are not only recipients, but also senders and even producers of information.

The received news are not only consumed but at the same time evaluated and processed – in the public. Thus, the analog and digital contexts are interrelated. Social and digital media change the communication behaviour and the relationship between author, medium, and content (Kenner and Lange, 2020). Digital Citizenship Education has to react to these changes.

People need to learn how to deal with the new nuances of political communication. In that respect, the access to and the skills for critical political participation on the internet are unequally distributed. The term «digital divide» is used in research to describe political exclusion through digital media.

## **2. The digital divides**

According to Caja Thimm, the digital transformation has created a «network of inequality» (Thimm, 2016b: 54). An internet of inequality.

This inequality becomes visible in two digital divides. The first digital divide is characterised by unequal access to digital media in the information society. The society is divided into those who use digital media in everyday life and those who do not. In addition, a distinction has to be made between self-directed non-use and external exclusion. The large-scale study *Digital Index 2018/2019* shows that the use of digital media increases steadily (to 84% of the people in Germany by now). However, around 10 million people still do not use the internet in any form (Initiative D21, 2019).

This exclusion from the internet is rarely self-determined. In general, external and structural factors are responsible for the exclusion in digital participation processes. Among other things, financial resources (poverty can lead to digital exclusion) and technical possibilities (for example the lack of expansion of fibre-optic technology or mobile telephone systems in rural areas) should be highlighted (Kenner and Lange, 2020).

The «digital gap» addresses the fact that a clear imbalance of presence exists in the digital space. Male highly-educated users usually show above-average participation in digital formats. Older women and people with a migrant background have less access to the internet. Normally, men are more inclined to estimate their digital skills more highly than women. Particularly men between the ages of 20 and 29 consider themselves to be well-versed in digital skills. The *Digital Index 2018/2019* reveals that factors such as gender, age, level of education, migratory background and place of residence have a major influence on the development of digital skills (Initiative D21, 2019).

The digital divide is caused by unequal access to internet-based digital media. But a second digital divide has long been identified in research: the unequal development of skills for the use and reflection of digital media (Rudolph, 2019). This does not only refer to technical skills such as programming apps or homepages. The Second Digital Gap describes the gap between those who see through the structures of digital media and those who only use it (Kenner and Lange, 2020). Anyone who knows the logic of algorithms and is aware of the negative effects of anonymous communication is able to instrumentalize the Internet. At worst, the second digital divide leads to new power structures in which a small information elite develops and determines the discourse (Niesyto, 2016: 20).

Competent users of digital media are able to trigger a wave of reactions through a single commentary or post. In their everyday lives, they are able to

articulate themselves and participate in social discourse in a way that would not be possible in the analogue world. Individuals and small interest groups have gained new power opportunities through digital meeting spaces and micro-participation.

Due to the unequal distribution of digital competences, the internet reproduces traditional forms of social inequality – and produces new forms at the same time. Thus, Digital Citizenship Education has to address the changing conditions of political participation.

### **3. The power of algorithms**

The direct influence of large technology companies on the political space of the Internet is highly problematic for citizenship education. The global digital industry influences the formation of political opinion of users (and thus of citizens) through algorithms (Schweiger, 2017). In the digitally interconnected world, information, posts, and opinions are tailored to individual user behavior by technical means, so-called algorithms. This usually leads to the result that one's own positions and ideas, and thus also prejudices, are strengthened. Other points of view tend to be ignored. The algorithm diminishes all those positions that question or criticize (Kenner and Lange, 2018: 16).

Due to the mathematical filtering of information, people on the internet move within their individual political 'comfort zone' in which they only read the comments and blogs that confirm their own view of the world.

Today, personal data is no longer collected only by public authorities and states. Private companies in the digital technology sector are able to collect masses of personal and politically relevant information about their customers, archive the information and make it economically usable. This is how filter bubbles, which suggest a highly narrowed view, ultimately develop. In contrast, network theory assumes that personal online networks are larger and thus automatically more heterogeneous, so that a person is more often confronted with heterogeneous content through direct and indirect contacts (Schweiger, 2017).

In some forums, these bubbles and networks fill up with so-called fake news, – or deliberate false information. They are intended to misinform internet users and delegitimize political opponents. 'Political opponents' does not only refer

to politicians and parties. By now, the sharing of fake news has established itself in broad social discourses. In right-wing populist movements, these news are particularly popular. The internet companies rarely take action against this. It is their aim to reach as many shares and comments as possible, because higher numbers of views lead to increased profit.

If positions are no longer confronted with opposing positions and if the confirmed opinion is more important than reflected criticism, a situation is created which has lasting negative effects on the democratic culture (Kenner and Lange, 2018). Against the internet's tendency to simplify, Digital Citizenship Education needs to defend the individual's ability to judge and reflect. That is why Digital Citizenship Education always entails a critical reflection of digitization.

In addition to the filter bubbles created by corporate algorithms, individuals create their own bubbles. In this case, they are called echo chambers (Hegelich and Shahrezaye, 2017).

Echo chambers have existed in the world of analog communication too. Human beings search for confirmation of their own ways of thinking. People have always searched for confirmation of their own attitudes and ways of thinking in books, newspapers, radio and television formats, and last but not least in conversations. But traditional journalism's high-quality media do not simply aim at confirming readers' opinions. They also aim at the development of individual judgement. To us, this seems like a particular shortcoming of many digital media formats: they focus on popularity and to a lesser extent on the quality of information. As a result, they have the tendency to lead to immaturity – or, as coined by Kant, the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another.

Mature citizens have to learn to perceive the digital world as a political space. There needs to be an awareness of the political and economic interests that underlie the structures and algorithms of the World Wide Web. To move within the constructs of filter bubbles, echo chambers, and fake news, and to identify and unmask them, needs to be learned (Kenner and Lange, 2018: 16). Only those who are able to question their own role within the digital world will be able to shape it. An awareness for political self-determination and against new claims to power within these digital realities is an essential aspect of a successful Digital Citizenship Education (*ibidem*).

The goal of emancipatory Digital Citizenship Education must, therefore, be to transfer the principles of Citizenship Education to the challenges of the

present. Citizens have to be enabled to carry out self-determined and critical judgments and actions in the political digital world.

#### 4. Digital Citizenship Education

Digital and social media have a lasting influence on the lives of children, adolescents, and adults. The digital world is interdependently connected with the individual, the society and politics. The new technical possibilities are indeed a product of society. But at the same time, they also create an augmented social and political reality. More specifically, by participating in digital processes, citizens can actively participate in the creation and design of claims on the internet and take responsibility (Isin and Ruppert, 2015). The political scientists Isin and Ruppert categorize those digital options for action in ‘callings’, ‘closings’ and ‘openings’.

‘Calling’ means the call to share opinions, values and data with a growing number of users. As a result people leave behind a digital footprint. Digital Citizenship Education must therefore aim to be aware of the digital footprint, the tracks in digital networks. People who are reacting to that ‘callings’ are confronted with two phenomena that Isin and Ruppert (2015) call ‘closings’ and ‘openings’. ‘Closings’ refer to those regulations that use filters or algorithms to limit one’s own actions and the information available. Many users subordinate themselves to these mechanisms mostly unconsciously. In contrast, Isin and Ruppert describe the so-called ‘openings’ as «possibilities through which citizen subjects come into being» (*ibidem*: 65) Above all, openings are «moments and spaces when and where thinking, speaking and acting differently become possible by resisting and resignifying conventions» (*ibidem*: 131).

But what skills are needed to be able to move autonomously in a digitally expanded democracy? What do citizens need to respond responsibly to ‘callings’, to deal with ‘closings’ in a critically-reflected way and make use of ‘openings’ self-determined?

Existing competence models have to be expanded regarding orientation and judgement skills. One example: in classical media-didactic concepts, it is essential, above all, to ask about the author of a text and his or her motives and interests. This is no longer sufficient for media criticism in the digital age. We

also have to ask why a text on the internet was proposed to us. Not only the intentions of the author have to be questioned, but also the motives of those who are responsible for the algorithms in use.

Digital Citizenship Education has to reflect on how the concepts of citizenship, participation, and democracy are changing in the process of digitization. Has the digitization of the political become a factor of post-democratization? Citizenship Education needs to question the apparent anonymity of this change. The digitization of democracy is not only a technical change. Algorithms have to be questioned with regards to the economic and political interests of internet corporations.

Social and digital media can create free spaces for new forms of participation. In particular, the dependence on established political actors such as political parties, foundations, trade unions and associations is reduced. In the digital world, participation is becoming more direct. Means such as online petitions are particularly popular. However, these tend to be perceived as quasi-plebiscites by a large number of supporters. This can also lead to frustration (Meyer, 2016).

At the social level, crowdfunding is increasingly used to raise money for projects or ideas. It is precisely in this area where social movements can benefit from digitization. They emancipate themselves from the influence of large organizations and institutions.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that digital transformation can have a positive impact on the processes of democratization of our time. This requires a Digital Citizenship Education that teaches people technical skills, enables them to deal competently with digital media and allows them to develop a critically reflected awareness of democracy. Citizenship Education is absolutely necessary for this. Analytical skills that adapt to the new conditions are needed. Citizenship Education needs to enable people to recognize underlying technical conditions, to question them and to develop a digital understanding of themselves and the world. (Kenner, 2020). «The increase in the possibilities of communication and interaction through digital media also means increased demands on the responsibility of the users» (Kneuer, 2017: 51, translated by the authors).



Digital media offers the opportunity to create diverse learning environments that establish an interactive and multi-perspective exchange about political and social problems. These opportunities must be used didactically. The progressing digitization of knowledge and the increased integration into everyday school life must, however, always be critically reflected upon. For Citizenship Education, digitization not only opens up new forms of learning. Digitization also is its object of learning (Kenner and Lange, 2018: 17)

Digital Citizenship Education is therefore always ambivalent: it seeks possibilities, potentials, and opportunities for political articulation in the digital world. However, at the same time, Digital Citizenship Education reflects on the dangers and threats that digitization poses for democracy.

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