

## BOOK REVIEW

### *The digital age and its discontents: Critical reflections in education*



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#### Book review

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#### [Editorial Board](#)

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Digital technologies are impacting every aspect of our lives, as also demonstrated by the current COVID-19 pandemic that forced us behind a screen for work, relational, and educational activities (Carretero et al., 2021). Besides the opportunities offered, several drawbacks are associated with increasing consumption of such technologies, as the consequence of the interaction with devices, in particular with interactive screen use (Melo et al., 2020) and the hidden ideological content of media.

In this context, the book *The Digital Age and its Discontents: Critical Reflections in Education* edited by Matteo Stocchetti offers an insight about the role of formal education in counteracting the downsides of digitalization and its ideology, offering intellectual tools for educators and researchers. Chapter 1, "Introduction," written by Matteo Stocchetti, starts with a deep analysis of the issues raised by technological development and the influence of digital capitalism on the relationship between social changes, increasing digitization, and education. Moving from the origins of this digital discontent, which coincides with the beginning of ICT developments in the '70s, the author retraces the capitalist appropriation of technological development through a literature overview, providing the theoretical grounds for the subsequent chapters. Keeping on the same themes, Marko Ampuja in Chapter 2, "The Blind Spots of Digital Innovation Fetishism," analyzes the destructive effects of the above mentioned appropriation, highlighting the risk for democracy due to digital innovation fetishism, and also the widespread incapacity to observe negative social implications. To avoid these unwanted effects, universities' workers and students need to be aware of the direction of digital innovation and the systems of production and consumption that surround them.

In Chapter 3, "The Screen as an Instrument of Freedom and Unfreedom," Amy Wendling focuses on the role of the screen in education, identifying the classroom as a privileged place in which to acquire a critical perspective on its use. Thus, the practical recommendation is to "invite the screen in the classroom" (p. 66), encouraging students' discussion around its opportunities and limitations. Furthermore, since students' attention is a limited resource against the cognitive effort required by multitasking, Wendling suggests that education and training should prepare students and teachers for the risks of suspended attention, increasing their awareness and ability to manage this cognitive challenge. In this regard, some scholars have recently underlined the importance of

integrating digital technologies in education while "balancing the educational opportunities with the students' well-being" (Melo et al., 2020, p. 2), thus confirming the relevance of a critical approach to media and technologies in our media-saturated societies.

Chapter 4, "Facebook's Response to its Democratic Discontents: Quality Initiatives, Ideology and Education's Role," edited by Lincoln Dahlberg, revolves around the theme of the quality of public sphere communication in social media platforms, examining the most popular one, Facebook. If democracy should be ensured in the world of digital social media, according to the author, critical media education is crucial to make students aware of the political economy and ideological ideas behind the platforms, by fostering critical thinking and public debates around social media's role. This claim is linked to an issue widely discussed in the literature, namely the integration of social media literacy into the educational curriculum. As shown in the literature analysis of Manca and colleagues (2021), a "glocal" approach to social media literacy that combines local skills and global meta-awareness is increasingly necessary. Therefore, social media literacy "may entail cognitive skills, collaborative practices, and participatory approaches that are influenced by local context and commercial imperatives" (Manca, Bocconi & Gleason, 2021, p. 13).

Chapters 5, "The Quantified Self and the Digital Making of the Subject," by Laurence Barry, and 6, "Can Algorithmic Knowledge About the Self Be Critical?" by Eran Fisher, tackle the issue of the impact of digitization processes on the self, particularly referring to the role of big data generated for each individual and the algorithms based on such data. On one hand, Barry provides arguments against the ideology and goals of the Quantified Self Movement, and the trust in algorithms for building knowledge of self. On the other hand, Fisher states that the "algorithmic self is a post-political identity" (p. 21) and, as such, is a challenge to the idea that the efforts to seek emancipation can be based on the centrality of the individual as a political subject. Remaining on the issue of the impact of digital big data on the self, Richard Hall in Chapter 7, "Platform Discontent against the University," focuses on the education context, particularly referring to the digitalization of universities. The discontent to which Hall refers is linked to the uncritical adoption of learning platforms, and the specific algorithm and data extraction for commercial purposes that infrastructuring entails. Thus, a question emerges from Hall's analysis regarding the possibility of approaching alternative solutions, with

learning platforms being designed based on justice and equality. Datafication and the related implications are the main theme of these chapters, entailing new challenges for media education and, more generally, for the educational context. In this respect, critical data education is seen as the way to raise students' awareness about the role of digital data (Knaus, 2020) in terms of data economy and surveillance capitalism (Pangrazio & Selwyn, 2020), and to support social justice against datafication (Raffaghelli, 2020).

Chapter 8, "The Technological Imaginary in Education: Myth and Enlightenment in 'Personalized Learning,'" by Norm Friesen, moves to a pedagogical dimension with an analysis of technological developments in education. Friesen highlights how the introduction of computers in education has been based on ideas of educational dialogue and personalized learning which are actually just a myth, "used not to explain a belief or natural phenomenon, but to justify efforts in the ongoing reform and development in education" (p. 155). In Chapter 9, "Technological Unemployment and its Educational Discontents," Petar Jandrić and Sarah Hayes identify and describe the categories of the educational discontent with technology unemployment: discontent with neoliberalization ("the trend of diminishing rights of academic workers and its consequences," p. 175), discontent with automation, discontent with dehumanization, discontent with acceleration ("concerned with ways in which we use technologies, rather than technologies per se," p. 176), discontent with content of work, and discontent with educationalization. This analysis aims at stimulating reflections to develop "new forms of resistance" (p. 177) and at exploring the relationship between education and technology unemployment. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider also the dialectical nature of the educational system, that while preparing students for the marketplace, it creates in turn a new kind of marketplace. The critical insights provided by Chapters 8 and 9 - educational dialogue, personalized learning, and the educational discontent - are further discussed in Chapter 10, "Pedagogic Fixation," where Christo Sims highlights how these myths can influence decision makers in education, thereby amplifying capitalist ideology. In this context, the shortcomings of practice inspired by capitalist ideology have been ignored and critical attempts to counter its detrimental effects have been hindered.

The problem of commodified knowledge and the role of MOOCs is addressed in Chapter 11, "Bildung in a Digital World: The Case of MOOCs." Danielle

Shanley, Tsjalling Swierstra, and Sally Wyatt discuss the origin of the fear related to the commodified and standardized knowledge offered by MOOCs. These reasons are not new and thus not intrinsically related to the MOOCs themselves, but are rather associated with the use of technology. Despite these drawbacks, the authors offer a balanced perspective on the use of MOOCs, underlining their potential for supporting Bildung and their versatility to "take different forms and be used to support different pedagogical models" (p. 227). In conclusion, after having discussed the enthusiast and skeptic arguments on MOOCs' use in higher education, the authors recommend the adoption of "a more nuanced understanding of digital or virtual spaces for teaching and learning" (p. 228) that can take into account the potential for fruitful engagement and intervention, considering the opportunities that online education can offer. Today, the problem of online education, and the critical approach it requires, is more relevant than ever considering that, early on in the pandemic, all school levels, including higher education, moved online. As a consequence, the need for improving teachers' and students' digital competences increased, as did the importance of pedagogical competences to innovate teaching practices with ICTs, balancing risks and opportunities (Melo et al., 2020). In the last chapter, "Afterwords: Critical Philosophy of Technological Convergence: Education and the Nano-Bio-Info-Cogno Paradigm," Michael A. Peters presents an intellectual approach to technological development and its discontent, pointing out that nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology, and cognitive science could set the conditions for new perspectives in science and technology, posing at the same time several challenges.

This book provides a deep reflection, from different (intertwining) perspectives, on digital technology innovations and the discontent they have generated. The role of education is to address the issues raised by the integration of new emerging technologies, through a critical approach towards digital literacy and education (Ranieri, 2019).

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