Ideology Critique in the Age of Algorithmic Governance: On the Transformative Power of Critical-Reflexive Media Pedagogy in a Platformized Society

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Christian Filk develops ideology critique as essential for media pedagogy in the platformized society. Drawing on German and English scholarship, he analyzes how digital platforms naturalize neoliberal power relations in educational contexts through a three-dimensional framework examining discursive narratives, structural arrangements, and subjectivation effects. Against platform capitalism's hegemonic logic, Filk proposes critical-reflexive media pedagogy based on four normative principles: digital maturity, technological solidarity, digital justice, and ecological sustainability. His article integrates German and internati-

onal research, demonstrating convergence in critical approaches to digital capitalism. He combines rigorous analysis with transformative practices like algorithmic deconstruction and commons-based production, transcending conventional digital literacy approaches. Filk concludes that realizing this critical-reflexive practice requires sustained international dialogue and coalition building across disciplines and geopolitical boundaries.

Christian Filk entwickelt Ideologiekritik als wesentlichen Bestandteil der Medienpädagogik in der plattformisierten Gesellschaft. Auf der Grundlage deutscher und englischer Forschungsarbeiten analysiert er anhand eines dreidimensionalen Rahmens, der diskursive Narrative, strukturelle Arrangements und Subjektivierungseffekte untersucht, wie digitale Plattformen neoliberale Machtverhältnisse im Bildungskontext naturalisieren. Gegen die hegemoniale Logik des Plattformkapitalismus schlägt Filk eine kritisch-reflexive Medienpädagogik vor, die auf vier normativen Prinzipien basiert: digitale Reife, technologische Solidarität, digitale Gerechtigkeit und ökologische Nachhaltigkeit. Sein Artikel integriert deutsche und internationale Forschung und zeigt Konvergenzen in kritischen Ansätzen zum digitalen Kapitalismus auf. Er kombiniert rigorose Analyse mit transformativen Praktiken wie algorithmischer Dekonstruktion und commons-basierter Produktion und geht damit über herkömmliche Ansätze der digitalen Bildung hinaus. Filk kommt zu dem Schluss, dass die Verwirklichung dieser kritisch-reflexiven Praxis einen nachhaltigen internationalen Dialog und den Aufbau von Koalitionen über Disziplinen und geopolitische Grenzen hinweg erfordert.

1. Introduction

> Technology serves to institute new, more effective, and more pleasant forms of social control and social cohesion. The totalitarian tendency of these controls seems to assert itself in still another sense – by spreading to the less developed and even to the pre-industrial areas of the world, and by creating similarities in the development of capitalism and communism.
>
> Herbert Marcuse (1964: 8–9)

The increasing datafication, algorithmization, and platformization of social life poses fundamental challenges to the theory and practice of media pedagogy. In an era where human subjectivities, social relationships, and cultural meaning-making are increasingly shaped by opaque algorithmic systems and the logic of corporate platforms, critical reflection on the ideological foundations of digital technologies and infrastructures becomes more urgent than ever. This theoretical-conceptual article advances three interconnected theses:

- First, the platformization of education constitutes a distinct ideological formation that naturalizes neoliberal values of competition, optimization, and quantification while obscuring the political-economic interests and power relations that shape digital educational environments.

- Second, conventional approaches to digital literacy that focus primarily on technical skills and competencies are insufficient to address these ideological effects and often unintentionally reinforce them.

- Third, a revitalized ideology critique – one that integrates materialist, poststructuralist, and decolonial perspectives – provides essential conceptual tools for both analyzing platform capita-

lism's educational manifestations and developing transformative pedagogical practices that foster critical digital citizenship, technological solidarity, and algorithmic justice.

Building on a systematic evaluation of ideology-critical research from the 1960s to the present, including the recent renaissance of critical approaches in German-language media pedagogy scholarship, this theoretical-conceptual article develops a transdisciplinary framework for analyzing the discursive, structural, and subjectivating dimensions of ideological formations in the platformized society. While drawing on empirical examples, the primary contribution lies in the conceptual integration of diverse theoretical traditions into a coherent analytical framework for future empirical investigations.

The article's argument unfolds through four interconnected sections: establishing theoretical foundations of ideology critique from classical Marxism to contemporary transdisciplinary approaches (Section 2); analyzing the platformized society's empirical manifestations and ideological effects (Section 3); developing critical-reflexive media pedagogy as transformative practice (Section 4); and exploring implications for research and practice (Section 5). This analysis synthesizes German and English academic debates, focusing on current international discussions around technologization and digital manipulation. On this basis, the article decodes the 'platformized society' as maintaining capitalist logics of exploitation and control under the guise of technological progress.

As an emancipatory counter-design, it develops the concept of critical-reflexive media pedagogy as a transformative practice that

fosters the ability to recognize, critique, and question dominant ideologies in formal, non-formal, and informal learning contexts. Using concrete pedagogical strategies such as critical digital literacy, commons-based peer production, and participatory action research, the article reflects on institutional obstacles and enabling conditions for realizing transformative media pedagogical practice in the culture of digitality. The article concludes with implications for future research and practice, emphasizing the continued relevance of ideology critique as a central dimension of media pedagogy in the age of algorithmic governance and the need for cross-sectoral alliances and public scholarship engaging with the democratic potentials and pitfalls of digital transformation.

2. Theoretical Foundations: Ideology Critique in Society and Media Pedagogy

2.1 Historical Trajectories: From Classical Marxism to Contemporary Ideology Critique

The concept of 'ideology critique' emerges from a rich and multifaceted history in the social sciences and humanities. Its roots reach back to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels ([1845/1846] 1978: 46), who analyzed in *Deutsche Ideologie* "ideologies" as "ruling ideas" ("herrschende Gedanken") that express "the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas" ("[die] herrschenden materiellen Verhältnisse, die als Gedanken gefaßt wieder auftreten").

For Theodor W. Adorno (1972), ideology critique meant unmasking the material conditions and power structures behind see-

mingly natural or unchangeable social realities. Louis Althusser (1971) made a significant contribution to the field of Marxist ideology by offering a novel and crucial insight: ideology is not merely a collection of false ideas held by individuals, but rather a material social process that facilitates the voluntary participation of individuals in their own subjugation. From the 1960s onwards, neo-Marxist currents such as British Cultural Studies and German Critical Psychology broadened ideology critique to encompass the domains of everyday life, subculture, and socialization (Hall 1986; Holzkamp 1983).

The German tradition of ideology-critical media pedagogy, emerging from the Frankfurt School in the 1960s, distinguished itself from 'protective pedagogy' ('Bewahrpädagogik') by focusing on societal power relations. However, as Niesyto (2017) documents, this critical tradition experienced significant decline as the field distanced itself from society-critical perspectives. Contemporary German scholarship is witnessing a renaissance since the late 2010s, with scholars like Niesyto and Dander developing frameworks that reconnect with Frankfurt School tradition while addressing digital capitalism.

Particularly relevant for contemporary media pedagogy is Herbert Marcuse's thesis of technological rationality as ideology in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), which shows how technology naturalizes political domination and creates a 'truly totalitarian cosmos'. This analysis directly translates to contemporary algorithmic governance in three distinct ways: First, algorithmic systems opera-

tionalize a logic of 'continuous optimization' that reduces complex social phenomena to quantifiable parameters; second, they naturalize competitive performance metrics as seemingly objective measures of educational success; and third, they establish a technological solutionism that presents digital tools as inevitable responses to educational challenges. Equally significant is Adorno's (1972) critique of 'semi-education' ('Halbbildung'), whose contemporary counterpart can be found in the rhetoric of technological competence. This rhetoric similarly reduces education to operationalizable skills, substituting technical proficiency for critical reflection, and thereby undermines the reflexive core of education by privileging instrumental over transformative learning outcomes.

2.2 Theoretical Integration: Synthesizing Materialist, Poststructuralist, and New Materialist Approaches

The conception of ideology critique proposed here deliberately interweaves different theoretical traditions. Classical Marxist base-superstructure models emphasize the material foundation of ideological formations. Poststructuralist approaches, by contrast, offer a more differentiated analysis of discursive power mechanisms. Karen Barad's (2007) new materialism transcends this apparent opposition through the concept of 'material-discursive practices', which emphasizes the mutual constitution of materiality and meaning. In analyzing the platformized society, this means understanding both the material infrastructure (data centers, algorithms, ownership structures) and the discursive legitimation

strategies and subjectivating effects as intrinsically interwoven (Couldry/Hepp 2017; Celikates 2018).

Contemporary German scholarship on digital capitalism contributes essential analytical tools to this theoretical integration. Valentin Dander (2023) develops a differentiated analytics of digital capitalist structures, working out four distinct analytical approaches to 'digital capitalism': data exploitation (Zuboff 2019), control of online markets (Staab 2019), operation of more or less lean platforms (Seemann 2021; Srnicek 2016, 2021), and distributive forces as a partial aspect of a globally dominant capitalist economic system (Staab 2019). This analytical complexity demonstrates how digital capitalism cannot be reduced to a single mechanism but operates through multiple, interconnected strategies of value extraction and control.

This theoretical integration contains inherent tensions. Marxist approaches emphasize material relations of production. Post-structuralist perspectives, in contrast, focus on discursive formations (Fraser/Jaeggi 2018; Foucault 1980; Choat 2010). These tensions require reflexive acknowledgment rather than artificial resolution. Similarly, posthumanist decentering of human agency might seem to undermine the emancipatory subject presupposed by critical pedagogy (Choat 2010). Rather than attempting a forced synthesis that glosses over these tensions, this article proposes a strategic theoretical eclecticism (Fraser/Jaeggi 2018) that mobilizes different theoretical resources for specific analytical tasks while remaining attentive to their tensions. This approach

treats theoretical traditions not as closed systems but as "toolboxes" (Foucault [1974] 1994) for critical analysis, allowing us to address the multi-layered nature of ideological formations in platformized society without sacrificing conceptual rigor.

As Andrew Feenberg (2017) argues, this integrative approach avoids both technological determinism and naive social constructivism. It recognizes the ways in which technological artifacts embody particular social values and interests while simultaneously acknowledging the contingent and contested nature of technological development. This dialectical perspective proves particularly vital for understanding digital platforms, which simultaneously function as material infrastructures, economic models, and cultural formations (Fuchs 2019).

2.3 Transcultural Perspectives: Decolonizing Ideology Critique

Western critical traditions gain enrichment through productive engagement with non-Western approaches to technology critique and educational philosophy. Latin American traditions of "popular education" have cultivated rich methodologies for ideological critique in educational contexts, with Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* serving as a foundational text. Indigenous critiques of technological rationality offer important perspectives on relational understandings of technology (Escobar 2018; wa Thiong'o 1986). In East Asian contexts, the concept of technological relationality provides a framework for understanding technology not as neutral or deterministic but as embedded in specific social and ethical relationships (Rošker 2023).

Beyond classical ideology-critical approaches, newer theoretical currents offer productive perspectives for contemporary ideology critique. For example, Achille Mbembe's (2019a, 2019b: 5, 7) concept of the 'planetary' provides a framework for a decolonial critique of Western capitalist technology regimes, contextualising the exploitative nature of digital platforms on a global scale.

In the field of media and communication studies, ideology critique has evolved through three key phases that directly inform our analysis of digital platforms: First, cultural analysis of representation and meaning-making, developed in Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model and feminist media critique (Mulvey 1989), provides tools for understanding how platforms encode specific worldviews while appearing neutral – crucial for analyzing the normative assumptions embedded in learning analytics and algorithmic recommendation systems. Second, structural analysis of media ownership and control, exemplified by Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model, illuminates how economic interests shape information flows—a perspective essential for examining the corporate concentration in EdTech markets. Third, contemporary platform analysis integrates these approaches while addressing new dynamics of datafication and algorithmic governance (Noble 2018; Srnicek 2016; Couldry/Mejias 2019), directly informing our critique of educational platformization.

2.4 Operationalizing Ideology Critique: A Three-Dimensional Analytical Framework

This article proposes a three-dimensional framework for ideology critique examining: (1) the discursive level of hegemonic narratives and legitimation strategies in digitalization discourse (Fairclough 2010); (2) the structural level of institutional arrangements and economic power relations conditioning media pedagogy (Couldry/Mejias 2019); and (3) the subjectivation level of subject models and self-governance forms embedded in learning technologies (Foucault 1982). This framework addresses systemic interactions between discourses, institutions, and subjectivities while identifying progressive potentials and transformative practices for democratizing digital technologies.

Given this diversity of ideology-critical approaches, a conceptual clarification of the understanding of ideology employed here becomes necessary. Distinguishing itself from both a neutral-descriptive understanding of ideology (ideology as any belief system) and a pejorative concept of ideology (ideology as false consciousness), ideology is understood here – following John B. Thompson (1984, 1990) and Rahel Jaeggi (2009) – as an ensemble of meanings that contributes to the maintenance of asymmetrical power relations. Thompson (1990) explicitly defines ideology as 'meaning in the service of power', highlighting how symbolic forms and discourses help sustain domination. Similarly, Jaeggi (2009) conceptualizes ideology critique not simply as targeting false beliefs, but as an immanent form of social criticism that works on the self-contradictions of social practices and norms to derive criteria for overcoming structural crises.

This understanding of ideology exhibits three core characteristics: First, it identifies the naturalization of contingent social relationships, which are presented as unchangeable or without alternatives. Second, it unmasks the universalization of particular interests, which are presented as the common good. Third, it exposes the concealment of contradictions and conflicts through integrative narratives and metaphors.

Importantly, ideology in this understanding does not operate primarily at the level of explicit beliefs, but rather permeates everyday practices, institutional arrangements, and technological infrastructures. Ideology critique therefore does not primarily aim at correcting 'false' beliefs, but at analyzing and transforming the material and institutional conditions that suggest certain ways of thinking and acting (Celikates 2018).

Having established the theoretical foundations of ideology critique, we now turn to applying this analytical framework to decode the platformized society as an ideological construct.

3. The Platformized Society as an Ideological Construct

3.1 Empirical Manifestations: Platformization in Educational Contexts

The concept of the 'platformized society' has become central to theorizing the increasing pervasiveness of digital platforms as mediators of social, economic, and political life. As defined by Van Dijck et al. (2018: 4), the 'platformized society' is "society in which social and economic traffic is increasingly channeled by an (over-

whelmingly corporate) global online platform ecosystem that is driven by algorithms and fueled by data". This definition encompasses three distinct but interrelated processes: (1) infrastructural platformization – the establishment of digital platforms as foundational technical architectures that mediate social interactions; (2) institutional platformization – the reorganization of organizational and governance structures according to platform logics of scalability, datafication, and automated decision-making; and (3) subjective platformization – the reconfiguration of individual and collective identities, desires, and practices through platform affordances and constraints. This multi-level conceptualization allows us to analyze platformization as simultaneously a technical, economic, political, and cultural process.

This theoretical framing materializes through concrete empirical cases. A study of Google Classroom's implementation in German schools documented how the platform's design encoded specific pedagogical assumptions that prioritized individual assessment and quantifiable outcomes over collaborative learning (Hartong/Förschler 2022). Similarly, research in Finnish educational contexts revealed how EdTech platforms systematically frame educational success in terms of measurable competencies aligned with labor market demands, effectively narrowing educational discourse (Saari/Säntti 2021). These empirical examples illuminate how platform logics materialize in everyday educational practices, reshaping pedagogical relationships in ways that often remain invisible to participants.

Recent German research provides additional empirical grounding for understanding educational platformization. Sandra Hofhues and Julia Schütz's analysis in *Plattformen für Bildung* (2025) offers groundbreaking insights into the platformization of the educational system. Their research focuses on those who develop digital technologies and analyzes the emergence process of platforms in the technical background of digital systems. What distinguishes their approach is that educational research places its focus directly on practical project work rather than restricting itself exclusively to theoretical aspects of computer science (Hofhues/ Schütz 2025).

The research findings demonstrate that platforms as new environments raise fundamental questions about how teachers and learners interact with each other and how they shape their engagement with technology. This cross-sectoral approach opens up diverse possibilities while simultaneously bringing considerable challenges (Hofhues/Schütz 2025). Christian Leineweber and colleagues (2025) document the methodological and conceptual considerations of an interdisciplinary research team investigating digital educational platforms, where the developed concept of 'makers' serves as an empirical approach to analyzing the emergence processes of the planned National Education Platform (Nationale Bildungsplattform). The researchers discuss challenges in researching not-yet-existing digital infrastructures and critically reflect on terminology such as 'educational space', governance

structures, and participation opportunities for pedagogical actors in platform design.

3.2 Differential Platformization: Regional, Sectoral, and Social Variations

A nuanced analysis of the platformized society demands consideration of regional, sectoral, and social differences in platformization. The penetration of different societal domains by platforms exhibits considerable variation according to geographical and social context, rather than progressing homogeneously.

From a global perspective, significant differences emerge between the platform economies of North America, characterized by Google (part of Alphabet Inc.), Apple, Facebook (part of Meta Platforms), Amazon and Microsoft (GAFAM), China (dominated by Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent), and Europe (with attempts at stronger regulatory interventions). These distinct platform regimes are embedded in specific political-economic, cultural, and regulatory contexts that shape their form and functioning (Srnicek 2016; Zhang/Chen 2022).

Sectorally, striking differences also surface: While areas such as mobility, media consumption, and retail have undergone extensive platformization, sectors such as education, health, and public administration exist at different stages of platformization with distinct dynamics and resistances. The German educational context illustrates this differential development particularly clearly. As the "Initiative Bildung und digitaler Kapitalismus" (2023) docu-

ments, IT companies and their lobby groups have been expanding into the education sector for quite some time. Through interconnections between business, associations, and state institutions, both covert and obvious influence and advertising occur. The Initiative demands a clear and critical stance from media pedagogy toward the comprehensive exploitation of personal data profiles and the far-reaching economization of living and educational spaces through digital capitalism (Dander et al. 2024).

Finally, social differences require consideration, as access to and use of platforms are unequally distributed along class, gender, and ethnic lines (Couldry/Mejias 2022). These differentiations prove essential for a precise ideology-critical analysis that avoids hasty generalizations and captures the specific manifestations and contradictions of platformization in different contexts (Hepp 2019).

3.3 Dialectical Analysis: Beyond Technological Determinism and Solutionism

This critique of the capitalist logic of digital platforms should not be misinterpreted as technological determinism. Digital technologies do not function inherently as instruments of domination, but as socially constructed and contested fields (Feenberg 2017; Verbeek 2011). The specific form that platforms have taken under capitalist conditions results from concrete historical decisions, economic interests, and cultural interpretations. Alternative configurations of digital technologies, such as common-good oriented infrastructures or cooperative platform models, remain technically

possible and already undergo testing in various contexts (Srnicek 2016; Feenberg 2017). This dialectical perspective on technology avoids both technological determinism and naive techno-optimism.

While the critique of platformization's hegemonic tendencies remains essential, equally important is recognizing the genuine emancipatory potentials and productive contradictions within digital technologies. The same algorithmic systems that enable surveillance can be repurposed for collective knowledge creation; the networked infrastructures that facilitate capital extraction also enable unprecedented forms of transnational solidarity and cooperation.

Empirical research by Velkova (2016) on free and open-source software communities illustrates how communities can appropriate digital infrastructure for non-commercial, commons-based production. Similarly, Milan's (2015) work on 'data activism' documents how marginalized communities leverage data technologies to contest dominant narratives and create alternative knowledge infrastructures. These examples highlight what Feenberg (2017) terms the 'democratic rationalization' of technology – the capacity for technological artifacts to be recoded with alternative social values through creative appropriation.

3.4 Ideological Effects and Contradictions in Platform Capitalism

The three-dimensional framework reveals specific ideological effects of educational platformization: Discursively, technological

solutionism merges with neoliberal human capital theories, presenting digitalization as inevitable (Morozov 2013). Structurally, economic interests remain concealed while quantification logics undergo naturalization. Subjectively, learners become self-optimizing entrepreneurial subjects while structural inequalities fade from view (Macgilchrist 2019). This narrows educational innovation to tool implementation, excluding alternative visions of education as critical reflection and social transformation.

German scholarship provides crucial additional insights. Staab's (2019) 'Zugangskontrolle' ('access control') analysis reveals how internet companies determine market access conditions across various economic sectors. From this dominant position, additional revenues emerge – a process that is empirically not yet fully captured but historically of great significance (Staab 2019). This concept of access control proves particularly relevant for understanding how educational platforms control access to learning resources, teacher-student interactions, and pedagogical tools.

The political-economic structure of the EdTech industry exhibits specific capital accumulation strategies that demand a more detailed ideology-critical analysis. The global EdTech market operates according to a characteristic logic of exploitation: Public educational infrastructures face colonization through free offerings ('Educational Landgrabbing') to subsequently establish profitable business models through lock-in effects, network externalities, and data monopolization (Mirrlees/Alvi 2020). This 'EdTech Power-Up' transforms education into a 'data-driven service sector' in

which decisions about curricular content, pedagogical methods, and assessment depend on intransparent algorithmic systems and predictive analytics (Williamson 2017). Particularly problematic is the increasing entanglement between EdTech corporations, venture capital, and educational policy makers, leading to a de facto privatization of educational governance in "Edtech Governance Networks" (Williamson 2017; Williamson et al. 2021) that operate beyond democratic control.

The subjectivating dimension of algorithmic governmentality manifests itself in a 'data-shaped doubling' of the subject, where continuously collected behavioral data transforms into a digital double that becomes the actual object of pedagogical intervention (Mau 2017). This doubling creates what Deleuze termed a "dividual" subjectivity, where the subject fragments into individual, quantifiable parameters and recombines according to their data-technical usability (Deleuze 1992). In educational contexts, this algorithmic subjectivation materializes in learning analytics, adaptive learning systems, and 'Personalized Learning', which constitute learners simultaneously as optimizable competence carriers and as permanent data sources (Williamson 2017; Selwyn 2021).

A consistently intersectional ideology critique must elaborate the entanglement of technological power structures with racist, sexist, and classist relations of domination. Ruha Benjamin's (2019) concept of the 'New Jim Code' reveals how supposedly neutral algorithms technologically fix historically grown patterns of discrimination and imbue them with the appearance of scientific objec-

tivity. This becomes particularly evident in algorithmic educational systems that claim to measure 'learning potential' or 'study aptitude' objectively, but actually rely on historically skewed datasets. The feminist critique of science from Haraway (1988) to Harding (2015) offers vital insights into the situated and embodied nature of all knowledge, which contradicts techno-positivist epistemology. For media-pedagogical practice, this means consistently combining technology critique with criticism of racism and sexism and making the specific experiences of marginalized groups the starting point for pedagogical reflection (Benjamin 2019).

Significantly, the hegemonic status of the platformized society rests not only on its infrastructural and economic power but also on its ability to colonize social imaginaries and desires. As Allert et al. (2017) argue, "digitalization has succeeded in establishing itself as the leading cultural narrative, as a way of seeing and understanding the world". This narrative depicts platformization as a teleological process of innovation and improvement, while excluding alternative socio-technical arrangements and value systems. In the educational context, this manifests itself in media-pedagogical programs that aim to produce 'digitally competent' and 'industry-capable' learners, while neglecting the promotion of emancipatory subjectivities and collective agency (Niesyto 2022).

Against this background, digitalization demands reconceptualization not as a technical problem solved through infrastructure and competencies, but as a contested social practice shaped by specific cultural contexts and power relations (Kress 2010;

Decuypere/Grimaldi/Landri 2021). This requires abandoning instrumental approaches that reduce media education to the imparting of digital competencies, embracing instead a critical questioning of the values, norms, and interests encoded into digital technologies and platforms. Simultaneously, it calls for a repoliticization of educational innovation that creates space for alternative understandings of digital sociality and citizenship based on values such as care, collaboration, equality, and sustainability.

4. Emancipatory Media Education as Transformative Practice

4.1 Normative Foundations: Philosophical Underpinnings of Critical-Reflexive Media Pedagogy

Critical-reflexive media pedagogy requires explicit normative foundations anchored in critical universalism integrating autonomy, justice, and solidarity (Fraser/Honneth 2003). Four principles emerge:

1. *Digital Maturity.* Extending Kant's enlightenment concept, this encompasses independent critical reasoning in digital spaces and active participation in shaping digital public spheres (Ouedraogo 2024).

2. *Technological Solidarity.* Countering technological individualism through commons-based infrastructures, collaborative knowledge practices, and democratic technology decisions (Rudschies 2023).

3. *Digital Justice.* Ensuring just distribution of technological resources, competencies, and design power, including equal access and participatory decision-making (Fraser/Jaeggi 2018).

4. *Ecological Sustainability.* Addressing material dimensions of digital technologies through sustainable design and critique of resource-intensive consumption (Mallia/Maslowska 2022).

The German tradition of critical media education provides essential theoretical resources for grounding these normative principles. Horst Niesyto's (2019) concept of 'politisch-kulturelle Medienbildung' ('political-cultural media education') calls for a comprehensive media-critical perspective that extends beyond aesthetic-cultural aspects to systematically analyze social, political, and economic factors and their structural interconnections. Niesyto identifies critical developments in contemporary digitalization, particularly the economic appropriation and exploitation of individual data collections with resulting far-reaching economization of everyday life spheres, as well as the formation of novel, partly authoritarian forms of domination in the context of Big Data technologies. These critical developments make it necessary to strengthen society-critical and media-critical perspectives in media pedagogy.

The concept of digital maturity builds upon Kant's understanding of enlightenment ([1784] 1912), while extending it to encompass the intersubjective and structural dimensions of autonomy as elaborated by Honneth and Fraser (Honneth 1992; Fraser/Honneth 2003). Technological solidarity combines Dewey's pragmatist understanding of democratic community with Marxist conceptions of collective agency (Dewey [1927] 2012; Marx/Engels [1845/1846] 1978: 5–8). The principle of digital justice draws from Sen's capability approach and Young's structural conception of justice, which

encompasses both distributive and procedural dimensions (Sen 2009; Young 1990).

4.2 Analytical Framework: Critical, Reflexive, and Transformative Dimensions

Critical-reflexive media pedagogy functions as a counter-hegemonic practice that denaturalizes the 'common sense' of the platformized society and imagines alternative possibilities for digital citizenship. This involves a three-dimensional process of critique, reflexivity, and transformative action:

1. *Critique: Unmasking Power Structures.* At its foundation, critical-reflexive media pedagogy involves analyzing the ideological assumptions, commercial interests, and power structures that shape digital technologies and platforms. This includes examining the capitalist logic of datafication, commodification, and surveillance, as well as the discriminatory norms and biases encoded in algorithms and datasets (Srnicek 2016; van Dijck/Poell/de Waal 2018). By making these often invisible structures visible, learners develop critical distance to the taken-for-granted 'neutrality' and 'inevitability' of platformization and recognize their own participation in reproducing these structures through everyday media practices (Niesyto 2017).

2. *Reflexivity: Ethics of Care and Positionality.* Beyond critique, critical-reflexive media education involves a continuous process of self-reflection about one's own position, values, and responsibilities in digital engagement. This means questioning how platform design shapes our subjective desires, imaginaries, and identities, and how our media practices intertwine with broader structures of inequality and injustice (Apple 1990; McLaren/Kincheloe 2007). Simultaneously, it cultivates an 'ethics of care' that acknowledges the relational, embodied, and affective dimensions of digital citizenship and foregrounds values such as

empathy, solidarity, and mutual understanding (Mihailidis/ Shresthova/Fromm 2021).

3. *Transformative Action: Building Counter-Publics.* Finally, critical-reflexive media education orients itself toward realizing alternative futures and social change. This transcends critique and reflection of existing power structures to embrace active experimentation with emancipatory media practices, the building of counter-publics and coalitions, and advocacy for policies that democratize digital infrastructures (Mihailidis 2019; Kellner/ Share 2019). Central to this are participatory, inclusive, and justice-oriented pedagogies that position learners as co-creators of knowledge and as agents of change in their communities (Hooks 1994).

The German tradition offers important extensions to this framework. Christian Leineweber's (2025) concept of 'Medienpädagogik der Affekte' ('media pedagogy of affects') analyzes the challenges that arise for the media pedagogical concept of media competence through the affective charging of digital communication processes in platform-supported public spheres. He argues that traditional media pedagogy based on Habermas's communicative competence can no longer adequately address irrational, attention-oriented communication forms (populism, hate speech, memes). Leineweber advocates for a 'media pedagogy of affects' that —drawing from Marie-Luise Angerer's theory of the 'non-conscious' inscription of digital media in subjective processes – considers the pre-reflexive, bodily, and technical entanglements between human and machine, thereby extending beyond linguistic-communication-theoretical approaches to media competence.

These theoretical dimensions materialize in concrete educational practices. Research in critical media pedagogy demonstrates how participatory analysis of students' own data traces and digital media engagement fosters critical reflexivity (Schofield 2012; Currie/Kelly 2022). For example, projects involving students in examining how platforms like Instagram and TikTok categorize and monetize their engagement enable not only the development of analytical skills but also transformative practices of digital resistance, such as creating alternative communication channels and collective action (Rodrigues/Castrillón Ángel 2024; Schofield 2012).

4.3 Institutional Contradictions: Navigating Constraints in Educational Settings

The realization of critical-reflexive media pedagogy confronts considerable structural challenges. Educational institutions themselves are permeated by neoliberal logics of efficiency, competence orientation, and marketization, manifested in performance measurements, standardization pressure, and precarious employment conditions. As Facer and Selwyn (2021) argue, digital technologies often reinforce market-driven principles, resulting in intensified workloads and prioritization of quantifiable outcomes. Similarly, Biesta (2019) critiques the reduction of education to measurable competencies, advocating instead for a 'world-centered pedagogy' that foregrounds ethical reflection over instrumental objectives.

The German context reveals additional institutional contradictions. Sabrina Schenk's (2024) documents the profound structural

transformation of democratic public spheres triggered by the emergence of digital media technologies, new political actors, right-wing protest dynamics, and populist political forms. Schenk demonstrates how digitalization has enabled novel forms of protest that fundamentally transform established structures of democratic public spheres. These developments challenge both the theoretical foundations and practical approaches of political education and media pedagogy, requiring critical reevaluation of their established concepts and educational mandates.

Transformative educational practice must strategically navigate the contradictions in which it inevitably operates:

First, the normative claim to critical reflection clashes with curricular constraints and time economies that favor instrumental competence orientation. Second, the idea of 'non-affirmative' education must function within institutions structurally oriented toward social reproduction, a point Giroux (2020) expands by identifying neoliberal power structures as barriers to democratic practice. Third, educators face the challenge of developing technology-critical perspectives in environments saturated with commercial EdTech, as demonstrated empirically by Kerssens and Van Dijck (2021) in their analysis of platforms like Google Classroom.

These contradictions cannot be fully resolved, but critical reflection can make them productive. In her study "Cruel Optimism in EdTech", Macgilchrist (2019) analyses how datafication in education exemplifies cruel optimism, where the object of desire hinders

one's flourishing and reveals the constitutive paradoxes of data-fied education. In "On Critical Pedagogy", Giroux (2020) emphasises that critical pedagogy functions as a transformative practice, extending beyond formal schooling to create conditions for democratic resistance against neoliberal market logics in education.

A transformative media education transcends narrow individual competency frameworks, adopting a systemic approach to structural conditions in a platformized society. Each dimension of the ideological analysis informs specific pedagogical practices: The critique of discursive formations (such as techno-solutionism and human capital rhetoric) translates into classroom practices that deconstruct EdTech marketing materials and policy documents, revealing their implicit assumptions and excluded alternatives. The analysis of structural arrangements (commercial data extraction, algorithmic governance networks) informs institutional interventions like platform cooperativism and democratic technology assessment procedures. Finally, the examination of subjectivation effects (the quantified self, algorithmic interpellation) grounds pedagogical approaches that foster alternative technological identities and practices centered on care, solidarity, and ecological sustainability. This multi-level approach, as Selwyn (2019) underscores in his critique of AI-driven educational utopias, requires both challenging dominant narratives and cultivating substantive alternative visions of education as a public good.

4.4 Pedagogical Strategies: Context-Sensitive Implementation Approaches

The implementation of critical-reflexive media pedagogy necessitates context-sensitive strategies that acknowledge institutional constraints while simultaneously identifying spaces for critical intervention. Several pragmatic entry points can be identified:

In formal educational settings characterized by rigid curricular requirements, educators can implement 'critical media moments' – brief, 15-minute interventions that interrupt conventional instruction to analyze digital platforms that students already utilize. For instance, examination of YouTube's recommendation algorithm can be integrated into mathematics curricula focusing on patterns, language instruction centered on persuasive techniques, or social studies modules addressing information filtering.

In resource-constrained environments, low-technology approaches such as analog 'platform mapping' activities enable students to visualize data flows and power relationships utilizing rudimentary materials like paper, markers, and string – demonstrating that critical digital literacy does not invariably require sophisticated technical infrastructure.

For educators encountering administrative resistance, 'stealth critical pedagogy' (Bradbury 2020) offers strategic frameworks for positioning critical digital literacy within widely accepted educational objectives such as 'digital citizenship' or 'online safety', while incrementally introducing more critical perspectives as institutional trust develops.

Cross-institutional collaborations between formal educational institutions, community centers, and digital rights organizations establish 'hybrid educational spaces' where more experimental and explicitly political approaches can be piloted prior to adaptation to more constrained institutional contexts.

What might a transformative media pedagogy encompass in practice? Moving beyond conventional approaches to digital literacy that focus primarily on technical skills or critical content evaluation, the ideology-critical media pedagogy proposed here offers four distinctive methodological innovations that connect theoretical reflection with practical transformation:

1. *Critical-reflexive literacy practices.* Unlike traditional digital literacy approaches that treat algorithms as neutral technical systems to be mastered, these practices include algorithmic deconstruction workshops where learners reverse-engineer recommendation systems, trace data flows, and examine underlying values encoded in algorithmic design. This approach is distinctive in treating algorithms not as mere technical objects but as political artifacts embodying specific worldviews and interests. For example, rather than simply teaching students to use search engines effectively, learners collaboratively map how Google's PageRank algorithm privileges certain forms of knowledge and visibility while marginalizing others, and then design alternative ranking principles based on explicitly democratic values.

2. *Participatory design and production approaches.* These include both data biography work, which combines autobiographical narration with critical data analysis, and commons-based peer production, in which learners participate in the collaborative development of open educational resources, community-

owned learning platforms, or cooperative models of data governance.

3. *Activist and interventionist methods.* These range from technopolitical intervention laboratories, in which learning groups develop concrete interventions in digital infrastructures, to counter-mapping and data activism, which make marginalized forms of knowledge visible and reframe public issues through a justice perspective.

4. *Relational and embodied approaches.* These include intergenerational peer learning for digital sovereignty, which productively combines different technology experiences, as well as restorative media pedagogy, which addresses the embodied, affective, and relational dimensions of digital learning and cultivates practices of care, healing, and resilience.

Implementing these transformative approaches requires not only new pedagogical methods but also a fundamental rethinking of the roles, competencies, and dispositions of educators. Media educators themselves must continuously engage in ideological self-reflection and develop the courage to stand against hegemonic power structures. This involves questioning one's own position and privileges, developing an intersectional perspective on inequality, and modeling vulnerability and openness to change (Cooke/Kouri 2021). At the same time, institutional conditions must be fostered that enable critical-reflexive practices, such as participatory governance structures, protection of academic freedom, and supportive communities of practice (Jesús et al. 2021).

5. Implications for Research and Practice

5.1 Methodological Implications: Towards Rigorous Ideology–Critical Research

An ideology-critical media pedagogical research requires a methodology that combines the claim of ideological demystification with methodological rigor. A multimodal approach integrating quantitative, qualitative, and participatory methods is suitable for this purpose:

1. *Critical Discourse Analysis.* This extended form of discourse analysis examines not only linguistic expressions but also algorithmic, visual, and material discourses. By integrating computer-assisted methods such as topic modeling and network analysis, discursive patterns in large digital text corpora can be identified and combined with qualitative deep analyses. In practical application, this involves: (a) collecting a corpus of educational policy documents, EdTech marketing materials, and platform interfaces; (b) employing computational methods to identify recurring metaphors, legitimation strategies, and narrative patterns; and (c) conducting in-depth qualitative analysis of representative examples to uncover underlying ideological assumptions. Such triangulation and analytical flexibility are emphasized in recent discourse studies (Rogers 2019; Wodak/Krzyżanowski 2008).

2. *Dispositif Analysis of Digital Infrastructures.* Drawing on Foucault's concept of dispositif, digital infrastructures are analyzed as an ensemble of technical objects, institutional arrangements, and knowledge orders. This method combines ethnographic observations with technical analyses and institutional document analyses – a perspective that has been fruitfully applied to the study of digital infrastructures and their hegemonic framing (Kitchin 2014, 2021).

3. *Participatory Action Research with Marginalized Communities.* This methodology ensures that those most affected by digital inequalities participate as co-researchers in the research process. Through the collaborative development of research questions, methods, and interpretations, hegemonic knowledge orders are deconstructed. Participatory action research has been shown to empower marginalized groups, especially when grounded in community engagement and critical pedagogy (Freire 1970; Smith 2021).

4. *Critical Technology Assessment.* This prospective method anticipates the social, ecological, and pedagogical impacts of digital technologies before they are implemented. Through the integration of scenario analyses, technology assessment, and normative reflection, technological developments are questioned in terms of societal prerequisites and consequences. Recent scholarship emphasizes including marginalized voices and adopting human-centered approaches to ensure that technological design and deployment serve social justice goals (Costanza-Chock 2020; Jasanoff, 2016).

German scholarship contributes important methodological innovations to this framework. Hofhues and Schütz's (2025) research on educational platforms demonstrates how focusing on those who develop digital technologies and analyzing the emergence process of platforms in the technical background of digital systems provides crucial insights into platformization dynamics. Their approach of placing educational research focus directly on practical project work rather than restricting to theoretical aspects of computer science offers a model for empirically grounded ideology critique.

This methodology integrates these four approaches in a complementary rather than additive manner. Critical Discourse Analysis

and Dispositif Analysis serve primarily analytical functions, while Participatory Action Research and Critical Technology Assessment offer transformative orientations. Together, they form a methodological cycle wherein critical analysis informs transformative practice, which in turn generates new insights for further analysis. This integrative approach acknowledges the tension between scientific rigor and normative engagement. Drawing on Harding's (1991) concept of 'strong objectivity', researchers make their positionality transparent as an epistemic resource rather than a limitation. In practice, researchers analyze their privileges and blind spots, incorporate diverse perspectives, and subject their work to intersubjective validation, as outlined by qualitative research criteria of credibility, confirmability, and transferability (Denzin/Lincoln 2002).

5.2 Institutional and Policy Transformations: Reconfiguring Educational Governance

Investment in the critical professional development of educators is urgently needed. This requires teacher training programs that foreground ideology critique and transformative pedagogy, as argued by Boylan et al. (2023), who emphasize collaborative action research and reflexive practices to dismantle hegemonic knowledge systems. Brookfield's (2017) model of critical reflection – integrating student feedback, peer dialogue, theoretical engagement, and self-analysis – provides a framework for educators to interrogate power dynamics in classrooms and develop emancipatory teaching strategies.

The ideology-critical analysis of the platform society has concrete educational policy implications that go beyond individual pedagogical interventions. It requires a fundamental reorientation of educational policy priorities and governance mechanisms:

First, a revision of digitalization-related educational strategy is necessary that goes beyond the technocratic fixation on infrastructure and competencies and places the critical reflection of the social, political, and economic dimension of digital technologies at the center. Educational plans and curricula must anchor critical media maturity as a central educational goal alongside instrumental competencies (Pangrazio/Selwyn 2021).

Second, an ideology-critical educational policy requires the development of democratic governance structures for digital educational infrastructures. This includes participatory decision-making processes in the implementation of digital technologies, the building of publicly controlled digital commons instead of dependence on commercial EdTech platforms, and the anchoring of data protection legal and ethical principles in educational technology development. As Williamson, Macgilchrist, and Potter (2021) argue, critical research in digital education must address how digital infrastructures are governed, who owns and controls educational data, and how public values such as democracy, equity, and privacy can be protected.

Third, this means promoting digital educational justice through targeted support for marginalized groups. Stoilova, Livingstone, and Khazbak (2021) underscore the necessity of addressing so-

cioeconomic disparities to ensure equitable access to digital education. Their research highlights how structural barriers – such as inconsistent internet connectivity, inadequate device availability, and uneven digital literacy – disproportionately hinder marginalized communities, requiring systemic interventions to dismantle these obstacles.

Fourth, this implies the promotion of transdisciplinary and participatory educational research that moves beyond measuring instrumental effectiveness to critically examine the social, ethical, and political dimensions of digitalization. Drawing on D'Ignazio and Klein's (2020) framework of Data Feminism, such research must center equity and power analysis, interrogating how technologies perpetuate or challenge systemic inequalities in education. This approach reimagines educational research as a site of critical praxis rather than mere tool optimization.

5.3 Transdisciplinary Connections: Situating Ideology Critique Within Critical Discourse

The ideology-critical perspective developed here engages in productive dialogue with complementary critical currents that systematically address the multifaceted power relations embedded within our platformized society.

Critical Data Studies provide essential methodological tools for analyzing power relations in increasingly data-intensive environments (Boyd/Crawford 2012), while Critical Algorithm Studies advance approaches to decoding algorithmic black boxes that shape

contemporary social reality (Pasquale 2015; Benjamin 2019). The intersection of these fields illuminates how data and algorithms co-constitute systems of power that often remain invisible to everyday users yet profoundly influence social, economic, and political processes.

Software Studies and Platform Studies examine both the material infrastructures and cultural dimensions of digital systems (Manovich 2013; van Dijck et al. 2018), whereas Surveillance Studies analyze the pervasive surveillance dynamics inherent to digital platforms and their implications for autonomy and democracy (Zuboff 2019; Browne 2015; Crawford 2021).

The German scholarly tradition contributes distinctive theoretical resources to these transdisciplinary connections. Valentin Dander's (2023) differentiated analytics of digital capitalist structures provides tools for analyzing data exploitation, market control, platform operation, and distributive forces as interconnected aspects of digital capitalism. This multi-dimensional approach complements English-language critical scholarship by offering specific insights into the political economy of educational technology.

Leineweber's (2025) work on digital affects and platform-mediated communication extends traditional media competence frameworks by incorporating pre-reflexive, embodied, and technological dimensions of human-machine interaction. This affective turn in German media pedagogy offers important insights for under-

standing how platforms shape subjectivities through mechanisms that operate below the threshold of conscious awareness.

These interconnected analytical frameworks deliberately integrate crucial insights from feminist, anti-racist, and decolonial technology analyses. For instance, Ubuntu philosophy's concept of relational personhood (Eze 2017) and Indigenous frameworks of 'data sovereignty' (Kukutai/Taylor 2016) offer powerful counter-narratives that challenge extractive platform capitalism by proposing alternative approaches to data governance grounded in principles of stewardship and relationality.

An ideology-critical media pedagogy must necessarily integrate these diverse yet complementary perspectives to develop a theoretically robust and empirically grounded understanding of complex power relations in the platformized society, thereby identifying substantive transformative potentials. This transdisciplinary approach constitutes an epistemological imperative for adequately addressing the sociotechnical complexity of digital technologies and their implications for educational systems and broader societal structures.

5.4 Epistemological Reflections: Towards Pluriversal Understanding of Digital Citizenship

Ideology-critical media pedagogical research must grapple with the structural obstacles and ethical dilemmas associated with transformative work within the constraints of the platformized academy. This includes addressing the precarization of critical

scholarship under neoliberal audit cultures shaped by performance metrics and accountability regimes (Shore/Wright 2015), the co-optation of radical pedagogy by the techno-solutionism pervasive in EdTech industries (Selwyn 2021), and the extractive logics embedded in data-driven academic infrastructures that prioritize commodification over ethical inquiry (Couldry/Mejias 2019).

The German context reveals additional epistemological challenges. Schenk's (2024) analysis of populist dynamics and democratic transformation in digitalized public spheres demonstrates how established concepts of political education and media pedagogy require fundamental reevaluation. The emergence of right-wing protest movements that leverage digital platforms for mobilization challenges traditional assumptions about democratic discourse and educational intervention, requiring new theoretical frameworks that can address affective, algorithmic, and networked dimensions of political communication.

Realizing the transformative potential of ideology-critical media pedagogy requires a fundamental rethinking of its normative foundations and epistemic commitments. This necessitates moving beyond Western-centric, anthropocentric frameworks toward a pluriversal understanding of digital citizenship that acknowledges diverse epistemic traditions (Escobar 2018). Such a shift involves cultivating a decolonial and post-anthropocentric ethics attentive to the entanglements of digital technologies with non-human ecosystems and Indigenous cosmologies (Todd 2016).

It also demands an affirmative politics of media pedagogy that not only critiques oppressive systems but also fosters speculative futures aligned with ecological and communal flourishing (Mihailidis 2018).

The German "Initiative Bildung und digitaler Kapitalismus" (2023) exemplifies how collective scholarly organizing can create alternatives to individualized academic labor. By bringing together researchers across disciplines and institutions to develop shared position papers and collaborative research projects, the Initiative demonstrates possibilities for transforming the production of knowledge itself. Their approach of linking theoretical analysis with practical educational intervention offers a model for engaged scholarship that extends beyond the academy to influence educational policy and practice.

These implications do not offer simple solutions or patent recipes, but they point to a transformative agenda for media pedagogical research and practice that is rooted in ideology critique while remaining open to its own continuous reinvention. Such a critical-reflexive practice cannot be realized through isolated efforts but requires sustained dialogue, coalition building, and public engagement across disciplinary, sectoral, and geopolitical boundaries. Crucial to this is that the voices and experiences of marginalized learners and communities are centered while simultaneously creating spaces for dissent, experimentation, and transformative failure.

6. Conclusion

The educational landscape stands at a critical juncture. As this analysis has demonstrated, the platformization of education represents more than technological innovation—it constitutes a fundamental reorganization of power relations that transforms learning into data extraction, students into algorithmic subjects, and teachers into content managers within corporate ecosystems. The stakes could not be higher: either we develop critical capacities to contest these developments, or we witness the consolidation of a form of digital capitalism that colonizes the very foundations of human development and democratic participation.

This article's three-dimensional ideology critique reveals how educational platformization operates simultaneously through discursive naturalization of technological solutionism, structural concentration of corporate control over learning infrastructures, and subjective constitution of learners as self-optimizing data sources. These interlocking mechanisms create what Marcuse presciently identified as a 'truly totalitarian cosmos' – one that appears participatory and progressive while systematically eliminating alternatives to market-driven rationality.

Against this hegemonic formation, critical-reflexive media pedagogy emerges as both analytical framework and transformative practice. The four normative principles developed here – digital maturity, technological solidarity, digital justice, and ecological sustainability – provide concrete foundations for pedagogical inter-

ventions that move beyond technical skill acquisition to engage directly with questions of power, justice, and collective agency. The pedagogical strategies outlined, from algorithmic deconstruction workshops to commons-based peer production, demonstrate that alternative approaches to digital education are not only possible but already emerging in diverse contexts worldwide.

The synthesis of German and English scholarly traditions undertaken here reveals remarkable convergence in critical approaches to digital capitalism, suggesting that educators across different linguistic and cultural contexts face similar challenges and are developing complementary responses. This international alignment creates unprecedented opportunities for transnational coalition building and knowledge sharing among critical educators, digital rights activists, and social justice movements.

Yet realizing this transformative potential requires moving beyond academic critique toward sustained institutional change and policy intervention. This means fighting for democratic governance of educational technology, supporting commons-based alternatives to corporate platforms, and creating institutional spaces where experimental pedagogical practices can flourish. It demands that educators recognize themselves not merely as content deliverers but as cultural workers engaged in the struggle for more just and livable futures.

The urgency of this project cannot be overstated. As algorithmic systems increasingly mediate educational relationships and platform capitalism deepens its penetration into learning environ-

ments, the window for developing critical alternatives may be rapidly closing. The question facing media pedagogy is therefore not whether to engage with these dynamics, but how to do so in ways that preserve and expand democratic possibilities rather than foreclosing them.

Ideology critique thus emerges as essential infrastructure for this work – not as abstract intellectual exercise, but as concrete practice of collective resistance and imagination. It provides tools for denaturalizing the apparent inevitability of current arrangements while fostering capacities for envisioning and building alternatives. In this sense, critical-reflexive media pedagogy represents a form of prefigurative politics: creating within educational spaces the democratic, participatory, and justice-oriented relationships we seek to realize in broader society.

The path forward requires sustained international dialogue, coalition building across disciplines and movements, and unwavering commitment to centering the voices and experiences of those most marginalized by current arrangements. Only through such collective action can we transform the profound challenges of the platformized society into opportunities for educational renewal and social transformation.

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