

Book review

Digital Media – “Loss of Reality”

Joachim Bauer* warns of the psychological consequences of digitalisation

by J. J. Wehrli



ISBN 978-3-453-21853-6

In his latest publication, “Loss of Reality – How AI and the virtual world take possession of us and threaten humanity”,¹ physician and psychotherapist Joachim Bauer deals with the influence of digital media. His core thesis: virtual worlds and social media enable, if not down-

right promote, an escape from the real world. As a result, humanity and thus all of society suffers.

With this publication Bauer joins the ranks of an increasing number of experts who warn of the psychological and societal consequences of unreflected media consumption that are now becoming visible.

Since the propagation of internet-capable smartphones in the 2010s, the habits of many people, especially young people, have changed dramatically. Many young people spend a large part of their lives in front of electronic devices. Joachim Bauer: “According to a study conducted by the *University Hospital Hamburg (UKE)* together with the *Deutsche Angestellten Krankenkasse (DAK)* [German Employees Health Insurance, edit.] 89% of children and adolescents aged 10 to 17 living in Germany regularly use a social media account, 74% do so daily. According to this study, more than 1.2 million children and adolescents in Germany spend more than four hours a day on social media. This means that more than 23% of

these cohorts meet the *World Health Organisation’s* criteria for so-called risky or pathological use of social networks. These intensive users are only the tip of the iceberg: if we consider the proportion of those who spend “only” three hours or more a day on social networks on weekdays, this is 40% and thus more than 2.1 million of all children and adolescents between the ages of 10 and 17 (on Sundays and public holidays it is 54%)” (Bauer, p. 73). Bauer acknowledges that these figures “rather represent the lower limit of reality”.

This amount of time is missing for the adolescents in their personality development, which they develop in direct interpersonal exchanges, such as in clubs and associations.

But with “what” exactly do the children and young people fill their time? Bauer explains: “The social networks are platforms of constant, merciless mutual evaluation and being evaluated” (p. 76). In this context, he refers to the increase in depression, feelings of loneliness and a strong loss of self-esteem. Bauer deals with video games in depth. He goes into great detail about the consumption of so-called fighting or violent games. Among other things, he points out that even so-called “family-friendly” platforms encourage children and young people to torment, torture, kill or engage in group sex (p. 95).

However, the negative consequences that can be observed today, such as gross personality disorders, obesity, suicidal tendencies, etc., are not seen enough and discussed in public. It is striking that this state of silence persists, although experts have been warning for a long time.

Reactions to consequential damages are conspicuously weak

Legislative consequences from the already known serious negative consequences of excessive media use – one should rather speak of media abuse – are not strong enough. (Who would want to “hinder” digital progress?*) Apart from rules on media consumption such as “3-6-

* Dr. Joachim Bauer, Prof. (emer.) is a physician, neuroscientist, psychotherapist and author of numerous non-fiction books. Bauer is a specialist in internal medicine and psychiatry and is also authorised to lecture in both subjects (habilitated). Joachim Bauer is not only a trained psychotherapist in psychodynamic psychotherapy, but also a behavioural therapist.

9-12", which are themselves extremely questionable, parents and educators are hardly given any help. – On the contrary, in some cases tablets are officially distributed to children as early as kindergarten. Bauer refers to his experience with responsible authorities who, disconnected from the experiences of practitioners, issue downright contrary official recommendations.

Is it analogous to what happened to the tobacco industry in the 1950s and 1960s, when it succeeded in downplaying the health consequences of smoking (cancer, etc.) in the public eye with dubious "scientific" reports and PR campaigns and exerted a decisive influence on authorities and official agencies? The consequences were millions of cases of cancer, smokers' legs, heart attacks, etc.

Escape into the digital world

Joachim Bauer certainly cannot be accused of being technophobic, but he warns of the wider dangers of digitalisation: "If we use them as tools instead of letting ourselves become their tools, digital products can enrich our lives. But we are about to pass the tipping point. Digital offerings have begun to take over our lives. Without us noticing, they gradually take us by the hand and replace analogue, interpersonal reality with its digital communication channels and experiential spaces. The change comes along in the guise of help: we are helped to walk until we can walk no longer. We are helped to think until we can think no longer.

Bauer notes that instead of dealing with the existing reality and improving it, more and more people are busy elevating their life experience into virtual worlds through video games, social media contacts or in new metaverses.

"Metaversum", will become the new goldmine of digital corporations. It is currently emerging. "They offer 'users' a virtual day-and-night habitat in real time, which they can enter with the help of a suitably equipped computer and special glasses costing between 400 and 1800 euros" (p. 99). Today, large corporations are already competing for future customers. In these living worlds, users can acquire a new identity, a new look, a new existence. They participate in this with their "avatar". Renowned law firms are already opening virtual offices in these illusory worlds for large sums of money, because profit prospects are tempting, and lawyers will also be needed there. This flight into di-

gital worlds has consequences for our world and for our future.

Real contacts are needed for a healthy self-esteem

Psychologically and from the point of view of the individual, an escape into the digital world cannot succeed. Digital media cannot fulfil the desire to permanently raise self-esteem, because they distance the "user" from fellow human beings and thus deprive the person of the real possibility of building up a genuine healthy self-esteem in direct contact. As with a drug addiction, the "user" needs more "successes" and thus increasingly gets caught up in a digital world without becoming more satisfied.

Transferred to society, this mass flight into illusory worlds of digitalisation has serious consequences for real problems. Who will solve them? Who still has the time for them? Who has learned to solve problems jointly?

"Transhumanism" as an ideology of the digital world

Parallel to this alarming development – away from the real world, which is portrayed as gloomy and dangerous, towards a digital metaverse – a trend of thought is being established, under the term "transhumanism", which is supposed to legitimise the digital world as another "true" world alongside reality. In short, human biology and technology are to merge. The idea here is not of a prosthetic leg, but of human brains being digitally copied and then "uploaded" for "eternity". These ideas are unrealistic and inhumane. They are based on an outdated and truncated view of man and the world. The human being becomes an immature creature, a creature that needs electronic prostheses to be considered a full-fledged person at all. The consequences of this ideology are ultimately discriminatory, the human being is incapacitated. It leads to a complete flight from the real world into a "digital cloud".

People are dependent on real social contacts

Bauer is concerned with humanism, not understood as a buzzword, but as a scientific approach that corresponds to human life. Building on his own decades of research in the field of genetic adaptation and psychology, he can show that the human being is imperatively dependent on social contacts to develop. Only in this con-

text can it develop and realise itself according to its biological-evolutionary nature.

An urgent turnaround is necessary

Joachim Bauer has succeeded in putting into words the widespread unease with an increasing “digitalisation” of our everyday life and in naming real problems relating to it. In addition to the effects on the individual personality, he points out the serious consequences for society

as a whole. He urgently warns against ignoring these consequences and calls for a turnaround. Through his broad and profound analyses of the dark sides of digitalisation, Joachim Bauer makes an important contribution to tackling the problems at hand.

(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)

¹ Joachim Bauer. *Realitätsverlust. Wie KI und virtuelle Welt von uns Besitz ergreifen und die Menschlichkeit bedrohen*. Heyne-Verlag, Munich 2023