Think digital, vote male?

If you are reading this, you are probably a guy. No? Then I am confused. Is this not an online blog? Germany is two days before the federal elections. Even though we cannot be a 100% sure who is going to win, one thing you can definitely learn from all the posters on the trees and boards: computers are guys' toys and the future of digitalization is male. Anything wrong with that?

The first time the issue drew my attention was right at the beginning of the campaign. Helpful hands from the SPD (Social Democratic Party) put up a huge campaign placard right across the street from my kitchen window. From the colors I could immediately sense which party was behind it but I also got curious because neither Martin Schulz (top candidate) nor any other familiar face was smiling over to me. Instead, there was a complete stranger with curly hair sitting on a bench, staring at the sky. The slogan goes: "Zum Land der Dichter und Denker passt eine Politik, die in Ideen investiert" ("The land of poets and thinkers needs a political agenda that invests in ideas").

Well, I kind of liked the slogan and message of spending money on good ideas. But I still did not get the entire story until I figured out who was sitting next to the guy: a robot. The robot's tummy looks a little bit like my old Nikon camera and he also stares at the sky with his cute robot eyes, just like his human companion. Ooops, did you notice it? I just wrote "he." Why did I not for a second consider that the robot might be a girl? Well, maybe the other posters are to blame.

After I encountered the first poster, I of course kept looking for more "digital" campaign visuals. And I did not have to search long. That same afternoon I walked the dog through our quarter and only about 100 meters from the curly-haired robot geek, I caught myself looking at a pseudo-sexy H&M model copy, all in black and white colors, wearing a suit. The barely shaved face sticking out of the suit belongs to Christian Lindner, top candidate of the FDP (Liberal Democrats). He is wearing earphones and is looking at the screen of his smartphone. The slogan reads "Digital First. Bedenken Second" ("Digital First. Concerns Second.").

As the slogan underlines, the liberal democrats not only think digital, they also think English – at least within easy grammatical structures. And Lindner underlines his global digital love affair on several other posters. I especially like the poster that says: "Die Digitalisierung ändert alles. Wann ändert sich die Politik?" ("Digitalization changes everything. When are politics going to change?"). Even to the non-literary studies folks

amongst you, it should be clear that the first part is a statement, the second part is a question. Statements should at least evoke the feeling of conveying some verifiable truth. Not so with this statement. It is either a mistake or a lie that makes the question that follows superfluous. If digitalization supposedly changes "everything," how can it be that gender stereotypes about technology are not part of the whole?

I kept looking for examples that convince me of some progress – no luck. All computer- and digitalization-related posters in the 2017 German election campaign have male faces on display – no exception, at least not in my hometown. A balance might somehow be created by the CDU (Christian Democrats) – they are mute about the issue. Smart Angie – before being pressured to make a decision on gendered digitalization, she prefers to wait and see! I am not saying that I do not like cute robots with nice guys on a bench thinking about some scifi-fantasies that will soon become reality. Still, I cannot believe that neither these highly paid marketing experts who developed the campaigns nor the candidates on display ever thought about the digital gender divide they are promoting.

Wait a minute – is that thought naïve in the first place? There are at least two possibilities. Option 1: Let's assume all of these posters are very well reflected and meant to express just what they display: men are in charge of computers. Let's face it, in the global context that is indeed true. There is a reason why the U.N. and global NGOs are running special programs to support women's access to technology. According to the latest statistics by the UNESCO, the global internet usage gap has even grown slightly to 12% in 2016. The biggest divide is found in the least developed countries. In Germany, one of the most developed societies in the world – at least in socio-economic terms - the gap still ranges at about 9 percentage points. So, if you wanted to display the average digital user in these posters, you would actually be correct in choosing a man.

Option 2 in my little thought experiment is to think that I am too positive in general about my expectations towards marketing experts and their ability to think before they act. In that case, they simply did what was programmed in their heads throughout millions of years in evolution and none of the politicians ever noticed anything either. This could mean: Men ended up on the digi posters without any deeper logic behind it. It is a mere coincidence, no reason to get upset, no reason to evoke the bigger picture, no reason to be hyper sensitive about gender issues and computer use. But is that really plausible, also for me to even notice the poster? Given the fact that people who know me often catch me saying sentences like 'I do not like that there are only women in this seminar,' there must be something noticeable that bothers me. I don't want to believe that marketing heroes and politicians alike are so ignorant.

In sum, the only way to find out about the digital gender games behind the campaign is to do research on it. But you know what? I am not in the mood for that. First, research is my job, so, in my free time, I can very well cope with staying on the surface of things. The surface of political issues is depicted on millions of posters all over the republic. That is what I wanted to bring to your attention. Sometimes the surface does reveal interesting and at times troublesome truths. Maybe that is also why, after only a few hours sometimes, the surface of the oversized election wallpapers literally gets scratched or peeled off by some annoyed vandals. Who cares? After all, it is just paper, relics of pre-digital times. And you know what? Paper would probably be the only sources I could consult for any kind of research. Remember, I am a woman. It is amazing that I have managed to type all this text here. How would I be able to use sophisticated digital technology in a land of ideas?