

Interview d'Ina Dietzsch par Carsten Wilhelm

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To begin, could you please tell us about your work in progress?

For many years, I have been particularly interested in the connection between mathematics and culture. With digitization, we are in the midst of a mathematization of all processes relevant to everyday life on a completely new scale. To apply a perspective from cultural anthropology to these dynamics seems to me not only appealing, but absolutely necessary. At the moment, I am working on various projects in which digitization and nature come together. In the context of communicating climate change, for example, I am working on what I call "digital water" - processes of calculating and technologizing water as a basis for its economization and politicization.¹

Can current communication technologies provide answers or solutions to cultural problems or even universal problems?

This is what is being said over and over again. It sounds simple - we have a water problem, so we save water with the help of smart irrigation. But it is not quite that simple.

Digitization as a social process is above all a promise of the future. Alexa Färber has developed an interesting concept of the promise as "promissory assemblage" and has shown in relation to urbanity how such promises work.² In our project on the digitization of agriculture in Switzerland³, we were also able to show this very well. Furthermore

1 Ina Dietzsch: Von Pfützen und Lücken. Urbanes Wasser posthumanistisch gelesen [Of puddles and gaps. Urban water read posthumanistically]. In: Oliwia Murawska/Torsten Cress/Annika Schlitte: Posthuman? Perspektiven auf Natur/Kultur. Tagungsband zum 4. Mainzer Symposium der Sozial- und Kulturwissenschaften am Forschungsschwerpunkt SoCuM, Mainz, 19. – 20. September 2019. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink 202

Ina Dietzsch: Waterworlds revisited. In: Hamburger Journal für Kulturanthropologie 2021, Heft 13 (Welt. Wissen. Gestalten. Themenheft zum 42. Kongress der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Volkskunde in Hamburg 2019), S. 79-95, <https://journals.sub.uni-hamburg.de/hjk/article/view/1725>

2 Alexa Färber: How does ANT help us to rethink the city and its promises? In: The Routledge Companion to Actor-Network Theory. New York 2020, S. 264–272 ; <https://urban-ethnography.com/2018/09/06/kickoff-keynote-the-city-as-promissory-assemblage-prof-alexa-farber/>

3 https://forschdb2.unibas.ch/inf2/rm_projects/object_view.php?r=4483825

digitization raises questions about the future that present themselves as challenges and fundamentally shake up the demarcations between humans, machines, and nature. Relationships between familiar entities are questioned and renegotiations are required. Within this field of challenges technologies are actors themselves. They can only be truly "useful" in situations in which we understand what they do. And for that, we need new knowledge and new cultural systems as much as academic conceptual approaches which give digital technologies their appropriate place in everyday practices and research. Only if we understand their potential, affordances, dangers and limitations in relation to human beings and social life, can we ask the right questions when it comes to making decisions if and where digitization makes sense at all. For me, this question is too rarely asked, both in professional contexts and in everyday life. Digitization is above all driven by economic processes and leads to new powerful clusters that still operate in the logic of growth. And I think we should allow ourselves to ask the question, whether we can even afford, in terms of resources, to fulfill all the promises of digitization.

The link between material aspects and digital communication is inherent in your work. You have been studying « the everyday life of publics » from an ethnographic perspective. Do you think that there is a relationship that deserves to be addressed between the evolution of communication techniques and the observation/description of human practices?

Absolutely, and not just one. In general, it can be said that changes in technology are always accompanied by renegotiations of knowledge and constructions of reality. At the latest since the rise of network technologies, we are confronted with challenges to modern ideas such as the depth episteme.⁴ Also, the person as an analytical category has again become more important than the individual. We can very well say something about the technological generation of persons, but it is also becoming increasingly clear that individuals consciously deal with what they are willing to reveal about themselves. This is where a whole host of interesting phenomena come to bear. Consider, for example, the cultural

⁴ See Michel Foucault (1974). *Die Ordnung der Dinge [Les mots et les Choses]*. Suhrkamp.

concept of intimacy.⁵ In my generation it was primarily information relating to sexuality that has been felt to be "intimate." Lately, in conversations with students and young people in general, I have repeatedly come across the opinion that also consumers' choices or voting decisions are "intimate."

Is the reference to intimacy also implying the question of privacy ?

It implies an established concept of data protection. In the future digital knowledge will be processable in ways we cannot even imagine. Yet, we have to make responsible decisions today on the basis of this non-knowledge. Above all, this means that we have to have confidence into social dynamics which will play out in the future. This is a great challenge, both in everyday life and in political responsibility. In terms of cultural anthropology and studies of culture (in German *Empirische Kulturwissenschaften*⁶), it is also relevant in so far as the reference to individuals as persons falls far too short and current concepts of data protection no longer adequately reflect the potential dangers to personal rights. This has not only implications for the protection of what we hold dear such as privacy. It also points to the fact that technological change is also accompanied by a fundamental shift in the practices by which we construct entities and realities in research. In recent decades, strongly subject-oriented disciplines such as empirical cultural studies or cultural anthropology have therefore undergone a massive transformation. Their empirical work is increasingly driven by theoretical considerations of complexity, their questions have moved away from what has been located in the individual into the direction of relational concepts or the idea of hybridity – in regard to human beings as well as in regard to relationships between human beings, technologies, and non-human organisms.⁷

5 See Anthony Giddens (1993). *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Stanford University Press.

6 What we now in Germany call Cultural Anthropology or Empirical Cultural Studies has developed since the 1970s, emerging from a critique of traditional folklore studies (*Volkskunde*) and Ethnology and being influenced by the work of well-known scholars in European and US-american Cultural Anthropology.

7 Some examples of publications: Farias, Ignacio / Bender, Thomas (Hg.) (2010): *Urban assemblages: how actor-network theory changes urban studies*. London ; New York: Routledge.

Can you give some examples ?

My inspiration comes from scholars like Marilyn Strathern⁸, John Law, Annemarie Mol⁹, Rosi Braidotti¹⁰, Nikolas Rose¹¹, Anna Tsing¹² and, of course, Donna Haraway¹³. In German-speaking cultural anthropology,

Fenske, Michaela (2013): Wenn aus Tieren Personen werden. Ein Einblick in die deutschsprachigen „Human Animal Studies“ [When animals become persons. An insight into the German-language „Human Animal Studies“. In: Schweizer Volkskunde]. Korrespondenzblatt der Schweizerischen Gesellschaft für Volkskunde 109.

Knecht, Michi (2012): Ethnographische Praxis im Feld der Wissenschafts-, Medizin- und Technikanthropologie. In: Beck, Stefan et al (Hg.), Science and Technology Studies. Eine sozialanthropologische Einführung. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 245–274

Koch, Gertraud (Ed.): Digitisation. Theories and Concepts for Empirical Cultural Research. London: Routledge 2017.

And Projects:

Curating Digital Images: Ethnographic Perspectives on the Affordances of Digital Images in Heritage and Museum Contexts, <https://uni-tuebingen.de/fakultaeten/wirtschafts-und-sozialwissenschaftliche-fakultaet/faecher/fachbereich-sozialwissenschaften/empirische-kulturwissenschaft/forschung/drittmittelprojekte/curating-digital-images/>

Challenging Populist Truth-Making in Europe (CHAPTER): The Role of Museums in a Digital 'Post-Truth' European Society; <https://uni-tuebingen.de/fakultaeten/wirtschafts-und-sozialwissenschaftliche-fakultaet/faecher/fachbereich-sozialwissenschaften/empirische-kulturwissenschaft/forschung/drittmittelprojekte/challenging-populist-truth-making-in-europe-chapter/>

8 Marilyn Strathern, *Partial connections*, Walnut Creek, CA : AltaMira Press, 2004

9 John Law and Annemarie Mol (éd.), *Complexities: Social Studies of Knowledge Practices*, Duke UP, 2002.

10 Braidotti, R. (2019). *Posthuman knowledge*. Cambridge Medford (MA.): Polity press.

11 Rose, N. S. (2007). *The politics of life itself : Biomedicine, power, and subjectivity in the twenty-first century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.

12 Tsing, A. L., & Pignarre, P. (2017). *Le champignon de la fin du monde : Sur la possibilité de vivre dans les ruines du capitalisme*. Paris: les Empêcheurs de penser en rond-la Découverte.

13 Donna Haraway: *Simians, Cyborgs and Women : The Reinvention of Nature*. New York : Routledge, 1991.

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there is also much interesting work going on at the moment, be it in Science and Technology Studies or on multimodal methodologies, research on digitization in everyday life, on more-than-human relationships or ontological debates.

How does this stimulate interdisciplinary work ?

There is a very interesting development, which, on the one hand, gives Donna Haraway's reflections from the 1990s a new relevance and makes them canonical. On the other hand, we can also observe a tendency to integrate a debate from anthropology into the mainstream of humanities that discusses the issue of different ontologies. Both make cultural studies/cultural anthropology connectable to philosophy as well as computer science in a completely new way.

As the cultural and media industries implement - and stage - technological advances, what would be their limits in promoting a technical paradigm shift?

In terms of the history of knowledge, this is, of course, always a question of our capacity to imagine. Technology or technological change does not just come out of the blue. Rather, it is a question of power relations, within the framework of which it is decided what kind of imagination is generated and allowed to become hegemonic. This does not mean that imagination not also strongly materializes itself. However, since hegemonic belief in progress and growth has brought us to where we are at the moment, I am grateful for all activities of an anthropology of the future and to all those, who for many years already have been dealing with hopes, fears, abilities to imagine and speculate and thus to shape the future. In my opinion, there is still some socio-political catching up to do when it comes to the question about who is included in and excluded from taking part in shaping the future. The debates of critical posthumanism are certainly of great importance here.¹⁴

Feminism and Technoscience. New York : Routledge, 1997. (ISBN 0-415-91245-8) (Prix Ludwik Fleck, de la Society for Social Studies of Science)

14 Braidotti, Rosi (2021): 2021, Posthuman Feminism. Cambridge, Polity Press. For summary and introduction in German see also: <https://janinaloh.de/>

Should a contemporary humanities and social science perspective on culture and on the relationship between cultures not be independent of these technological changes?

Definitely not. Although many would still like to believe that. We cannot deal with a single research issue without being confronted with technology at one point or another. I even think it is dangerous to pretend that we would be able to do so. Simulations have long since caught up with us. They are designed to "relieve" us of the question of whether what we perceive is "real." They seduce us to lose sight of what is technological and therefore also to lose the judgment for ontological difference and the ability to recognize technological manipulation.

Today, when we speak of assemblages or ontologies rather than cultures, we are trying to do justice to the complex processes of *worlding*¹⁵ taking place wherever humans are involved. We are increasingly looking for complex structural models that try to capture processes of emergence, movement, subjectivations, materializations, stabilization, fluidization, etc., and to represent them in a reasonably adequate way, thereby engaging in a lively exchange of metaphors between the technical, natural and social sciences and the humanities.

In the initiative "Digitization in Everyday Life,"¹⁶ a group of researchers documents the daily life of digital practices in the folds of society (leisure, work, writing...) and questions the methods used to study them - can we still distinguish these digital information and communication technologies from what surrounds them?

We all start more or less from a basic understanding in which we speak of media practices and media ecologies. And as Madianou and Miller have already shown in 2012¹⁷, this is a productive approach to look at how interactions between human beings and technologies work in concrete terms. Underlying is, of course, a much more fundamental question. On

15 Descola, Philippe : Cognition, Perception and Worlding. In : Interdisciplinary Science Reviews Volume 35, 2010 - Issue 3-4: History and Human Nature

16 <https://www.goingdigital.de/>

17 Madianou, Mirca / Miller, Daniel (2012): Migration and new media: transnational families and polymedia. Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge

the one hand, we need to ask whether it still makes sense to speak of explicit digitization research in the future. On the other hand, there is some expertise among early digitization researchers that many others in cultural studies do not possess¹⁸. This contradictory situation is at the moment a current issue, which is discussed within the group.

Robotics – as an example - already very present in industrial production - seeks to convince us of an artificial sentience of humanoid social robots¹⁹ - this project goes beyond the search for productivity, what is the purpose of this "script" according to you, its influence on our relationships, our desires, and how can we understand it from a humanities and social science perspective?

It is an old desire of human beings to overcome their vulnerability as living creatures, which is often understood as inadequacy and imperfection. However, and this is where it gets interesting for me again, we should take a closer look at *whose* wishes are once again being elevated and hegemonized as generally human ones. These desires can be analyzed very clearly in projects such as *Sophia*.²⁰ The principle of Sophia includes a range of technologies ostensibly representing “white male” desire and thoughtlessness in the sense of a traditional modern humanism. Although recently it has been completed by “female” emotional intelligence. Such projects are very contrary to what Donna Haraway once imagined as a feminist-emancipatory cyborg ²¹ and they

18 *Note de l'éditeur du numéro* : For France we can point to the sociology of use, which has started to investigate the sociocultural frames of digitization way before the public internet, see for example : Wilhelm, Carsten and Thévenin, Olivier (2017). *The French Context of Internet Studies: Sociability and digital practice*. Stefanie Averbeck-Lietz. *Kommunikationswissenschaft im internationalen Vergleich : Transnationale Perspektiven*, Springer VS, pp.161-184.
19 Cécile Dolbeau-Bandin and Carsten Wilhelm, “Comment apprivoiser son public avec un robot dit social ?”, *Communication, technologies et développement* [Online], 10 | 2021, <http://journals.openedition.org/ctd/5790>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ctd.5790>

20 <https://www.hansonrobotics.com/>

21 Donna Haraway: *Simians, Cyborgs and Women : The Reinvention of Nature*. New York : Routledge, 1991.

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promote massive criticism most of all by feminist scholars around the globe. See for example anthropologist Kathleen Richardson and her fight against sex robots in the shape of female bodies and robotic technologies which cut female bodies into pieces, or computer scientist Joy Buolamwini and her research on biases in facial recognition.²²

By developing Karina Knorr Cetina's concept of scopic media²³, which create "synthetic" situations of potentially global communication, and Manovich's software studies²⁴, which position the code as a transcoded actor between technology and culture, you put forward the concept of a synthetic-human assemblage of half-local half-global situations. In these assemblages, how can we think of different local and collective (cultural, ethnic or national) communicative contexts?

The concept of assemblage is for me at the moment the one that lets us think complexity with the greatest possible openness. It forms an open framework for all kinds of structure. Not only national structures are just as analyzable as regional, local or culturally defined collectives. With a perspective informed by theories of assemblage, these mechanisms are no longer self-explanatory, and they are no less complex than others. The analytical notion of assemblage helps us to understand the immensely diverse cultural work that is necessary to (be able to) think in terms of such geopolitical structures in the first place.

Following your recent research on digitization in agriculture, what role does digital communication play in the management of vital resources and how can it be rethought from a human and social sciences perspective?

Feminism and Technoscience. New York : Routledge, 1997. (ISBN 0-415-91245-8) (Prix Ludwik Fleck, de la Society for Social Studies of Science)

22 Richardson, Kathleen (2015): *An Anthropology of Robots and AI. Annihilation Anxiety and Machines*. Routledge. See also: campaignagainstsexrobots.org; Joy Buolamwini: <https://www.media.mit.edu/people/joyab/overview/>

23 Knorr Cetina, Karin (2014): *Scopic media and global coordination: the mediatization of face-to-face encounters*. In: Lundby, Knut (Ed.): *Mediatization of Communication*. Berlin: de Gruyter, pp. 39-62.

24 Masure, A. (2013). Lev Manovich, *Le logiciel au pouvoir*, Software takes command, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. *Interfaces numériques*, 2 (3). <https://www.unilim.fr/interfaces-numeriques/2192>

First of all, this field of research shows clearly that digitization also requires cultural historization. Not only do we find an impenetrable web of electrical engineering, automation and digital objects there. It is also about accounting numeracy and sequencing/molecularizing biotechnologies, all of which have prepared what we now call digitization. In particular, I have been exploring how ideas of life and the categorizations made on their basis are changing. The digitization in agriculture can be seen as an extensive infrastructural transformation within the framework of what might also be called digital biocapitalism.²⁵ This involves sociotechnical imagining, infrastructuring, and blackboxing; humans, animals, plants, and artifacts become equals by being molecularized and sequenced for digital processing. Along the way, familiar boundaries become irrelevant, and others emerge anew. It is a huge interdisciplinary field that is opening up here.

Could the current topos of “digital sobriety” also be a prospective subject for our interdisciplinary field on cultural dimensions of socio-technological entanglements? As a collective version of voluntary disconnection, it seems to replace the initial promise of digital technologies as eco-compatible and politicizes the debate. Bruno Latour asked in 2017, “Where to land?”, do you have a proposal?

I think we need a fundamental, inclusive debate about how we want to live and what we want to use technologies for that require energy in the future. In addition, we need an educational policy mandate to develop digital technologies on behalf of the public, in order to make society independent of commercial offers (especially in academia). Both in open access and in scientist tracking controversies we really always also discuss the freedom of science and the humanities. We need public programs for software and hardware development to strengthen open source and to extend digital literacy to programming and the ability to write software. In addition, we need new concepts of data protection that are detached from the individual and flexibly prepared for future ontological disputes - in other words, procedures that strengthen the

25 For a summary of the debate see: Peters, Michael A., And Priya Venkatesan. “Biocapitalism and the Politics of Life.” *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations*, vol. 2, no. 2, Addleton Academic Publishers, 2010, pp. 100–22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26804354>.

emancipatory potential of technological development and deemphasize economic exploitability.

Dear Professor Dietzsch, thank you very much for your stimulating insights and your valuable contributions to this issue.