

# SESSION: Lost in Digitalization: How can Anthropology Navigate the Digital?

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There is no doubt that the ubiquity of digital media technology is reaching new heights and inspiring dystopic future scenarios. The rate and complexity of technological innovations (e.g. the intransparent use of algorithms), new developments in personalized commercial and political advertising, as well as the more intricate neuro-scientific and psychological models used in tech industry, are only some of the factors influencing the sense-making of what it means to navigate a digital world.

Particularly, young people - the so called generation of "digital natives" - are frequently portrayed as a symbol of a new anthropological subject. However, these young people are neither cyborgs with super powers, nor narcissists devoid of humanity, but social actors negotiating cultural ideas, technological possibilities and requirements of market economy – while effortlessly integrating new technology into everyday life. But what does this new dimension of being-a-human mean for anthropologists? How do we understand and take into account the digital, without separating it from the analogue social, cultural and political reality? How do we read between the lines of the seemingly power- and ideology-free technology, rapidly becoming a part of everyday life, much faster than we can make sense of? And what does the digitization itself mean for the concrete ethnographic fieldwork?

Hence, the need for an intense interdisciplinary dialogue between anthropology and other disciplines concerned with similar issues is of utmost urgency. In this session, we explore the challenges and possibilities of digital livelihoods, an ethnography in a highly digitalized environment and ways of interdisciplinary collaboration.

Junior researchers (from MA to PhD) from anthropology and other disciplines concerned with the aforementioned issues are invited to submit abstracts (max. 350 words) for 15 min presentations, followed by a discussion. The presentation can also involve digital tools, multimedia content or interactive elements. In addition, young scholars will receive guidance and feedback from senior researchers.

Preferred session language is English, however German is also possible.

## PAPER PRESENTATION:

### **Touching, tasting, trying out: Encounters between small children, digital devices, and camera ethnographers**

*Hare, Pip (Universität Siegen, Berlin, GER); Vogelpohl, Astrid (Universität Siegen, Berlin, GER)*

For today's youngest generations across many parts of the world, 'the digital' is simply part of everyday life. As they explore the environments they grow up in, smartphones and tablets are just some of the objects that small children encounter, test, and taste. Sometimes grandma might be visible, moving and talking, on a glossy screen; sometimes it could be Peppa Pig; sometimes the object is dark and dull. As in the classic game of Peek-A-Boo, sometimes persons or objects are—or seem to be—there, sometimes not. Exploring the manifold ways of being (more or less) 'there' is just one focus that has evolved in the camera ethnographic research we have been doing within the project 'Early Childhood and Smartphone' (Professor Jutta Wiesemann, Collaborative Research Centre 'Media of Cooperation', University of Siegen, Germany).

In our presentation, we would like to introduce how we use camera ethnography in our current research in families with small children and digital devices. Camera ethnography (Bina Mohn) is a specific way of working with the visual: starting from the assumption that what we are interested in may not (yet) be visible, we use the camera and editing software as analytical tools within a circular collaborative research process that incorporates observing, filming, reviewing, arranging, editing, and showing.

Focusing on everyday practices, we explore how different analogue and digital media are discovered and appropriated by children who engage with them creatively. Technological infrastructures create opportunities and limits in ways that are often not directly visible, but become apparent when a connection fails, for example. 'Digital natives' develop practices that may go beyond the uses foreseen by creators of technological devices and systems. In a similar way, we are currently experimenting with 'thick showing' (cf. Geertz "thick description"): ways of presenting our audiovisual work in forms that invite the audience to join the research process as they explore and interact with it, co-constructing meanings as they move through an installation or select from a range of thematically-organised films in a digital archive. We would like to share some of our latest work and discuss both methodology and content.

### **Human in the Digital Cave: hidden parameters**

*Drijiruk, Mihail (student, Tallinn, EST)*

Symbiotic transcendence of information and communication forms via the digital technology has led to a constant transformation of human and rapid establishment of (post) cyberculture. The research attempts to overview the human, newly embodied cultural forms, and how they are affected by the dynamics of social challenges. Also our task is to explore metaphysics and ontology of human existence in the new digital realm, where the simulated information creates symbolic second reality with its new meanings, ethics and consequences. MA thesis researches how through imitation, simulation and synthesis digital culture by information and its practices can substitute the essential reality and forms of being.

In 2017 I shot a fieldwork observation comprising in a short documentary 'GAMER' about the teenager immersed in the digital reality (mostly online role games) (link <https://youtu.be/ja56rp30Pf8>). Using ideas of cultural anthropology, psychoanalysis and phenomenology I plan to make a 20-25 min. docu-fiction film about the transformations of personality and society in the digitalized techno-culture. The film structure will comprise of 3 chapters, building a story matrix as an objective-subjective-symbolic triad symmetrically to a documentary, fiction/semi-fiction and experimental video parts, where I plan to use a mix of digital technologies to create the atmosphere of immersive self-converted simulation (see the reference – experimental docu-fiction "Nomads" by Felix & Paul, 2016). Also for the last film chapter the animation might be used as well in order to explain visually what is hard to reflect via observational methods (reference – experimental film 'Tetragrammaton', 2017).

### **Smart Ethnography: hype and hope in digital fashion design**

*Johnson, Eleanor (UCL, London, GBR)*

My name is Eleanor Johnson and I am currently conducting field research for my MSc in Digital Anthropology at UCL. My field site is at the London College of Fashion's Digital Anthropology Lab where I am on the trail of "wearables" and so-called "smart materiality". The provisional title of my paper is Smart Ethnography: hype and hope in digital fashion design.

My focus is on technological affect; particularly trust and anxieties surrounding the digital, and other discourses around creating digital fashion items. So far in my research, I've begun to notice a disconnect between the people, ideas and capacities of technological artefacts. Words such as smart, digital, design, anthropology and wearables mean different things to different people. Perhaps the design lab has become a world where objects lead and shape people and language, pushing beyond Michel Callon's notion of Hybrid Communities, where objects and people co-emerge.

Conducting ethnography in a highly digitised environment has been a challenge. Certainly, my first three weeks here at the lab have raised questions about how well anthropological methods are equipped to provide useful and honest insights into how humans interact with the digital. Anthropologists who work in digital design environments often struggle to conceptualise these cultures. Is it sufficient to step back and write about the digital without using the tools ourselves? Are there processes within iterative design that can enable the anthropologist to work both with and through digital technologies? What are the possibilities for developing new frameworks for reflexive anthropology within digital cultures? How can we conduct ethnographies of digital things that don't yet exist in their physical forms? My dissertation, which is to be submitted in September 2018, will explore these topics. I am a keen communicator and would love the opportunity to present my research at VANDA.

## **POSER PRESENTATION:**

### **Projekt PANDORA: Zur Grundlegung einer Philosophischen Anthropologie zwischen Next Generation Internet, Digital-Ontologischer Revolution und Antikopernikanischer Wende**

*Reichl, Peter (University of Vienna, Vienna, AUT)*

Vor dem Hintergrund einer zunehmend orientierungslos erscheinenden Gesellschaft im Digitalen Wandel zeigt sich die dringende Notwendigkeit einer grundsätzlichen Diskussion über die Welt, die wir da gerade schaffen, und insbesondere die Beziehung des Menschen zu seinen (zunehmend digitalisierten und vernetzten) Technologien darin. Dabei kommt der Informatik als zuständiger Fachdisziplin im entstehenden interdisziplinären Diskurs eine zentrale Rolle zu.

Bislang führen philosophische Positionen im Kontext der Entwicklung von Informations- und Kommunikationstechnologie allerdings eher ein Nischendasein. Hier setzt die interdisziplinär angelegte Initiative PANDORA an und zielt auf die Grundlegung einer Philosophischen Anthropologie im Zeitalter von Internet-of-Things, Künstlicher Intelligenz und Industrie 4.0, die über informations- und kommunikationsethische Fragestellungen hinausgeht und sich in breitem Ansatz mit der Stellung des Menschen in und gegenüber einer IKT-dominierten Welt beschäftigt.

Um hierbei die besondere, wechselseitige Formung von Mensch und digitaler Technologie zu untersuchen, bedarf es neuer theoretischer Perspektiven in Technikphilosophie, Soziologie und Anthropologie. Die zugrundeliegende Digitale Ontologie ist im Kern relational, den Menschen und Technologien Handlungsfähigkeit zuschreibend und sie ontologisch nicht voneinander trennend. Hierfür sind insbesondere Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie, Postphänomenologie und Agentieller Realismus relevant, ebenso aktuelle Entwicklungen in Soziotechnologie, Partizipation und Awareness. Einen weiteren Ausgangspunkt für die Reflexion liefert Günther Anders und seine Technikphilosophie des Monströsen. Die von ihm diagnostizierte "prometheische

Scham" über das Gefälle zwischen Vor-stellen und Her-stellen von Technologie ist unverändert aktuell, droht aber angesichts des Digitalen Wandels einer Resignation vor der sich verselbständigenden technologischen Entwicklung zu weichen.

Auf dieser theoretischen Basis öffnet eine Digitale Anthropologie dringend benötigte Diskursräume, die sich pragmatisch auf verschiedenste Bereiche anwenden lassen. Inhaltlich reicht dies von Künstlicher Intelligenz und Robotik über Internet of People, Data Analytics, Citizen Science und Crowd-Technologien bis hin zur Soziologie der Dinge und zu zukünftiger digitaler Hochgeschwindigkeitsdemokratie. Globale Digitalisierung ist dabei keine eindimensionale Entwicklung, der wir (etwa aufgrund der mittlerweile erreichten Monopolsituationen) einfach ausgeliefert wären. Stattdessen gilt es für die einzelnen EntwicklerInnen und BenutzerInnen, als Teil eines permanenten „Technology Shaping-Prozesses“ Möglichkeiten gestalterisch in Technologieentwicklung einzugreifen und Markttreiber, Regulierung und gesellschaftliche Rahmenbedingungen in vielfältigen Prozessen mitzugestalten.

So erlangt aufgrund der neuen faszinierenden technischen Möglichkeiten die grundsätzliche Frage der Verantwortung in der Gestaltung der Technik durch den Menschen grössere Aktualität denn je. Vor dem utopischen Hintergrund einer „Antikopernikanischen Wende“, die darauf abzielt, den Menschen wieder zurück ins Zentrum des technologischen Universums zu stellen, bildet dieser Diskurs eine unabdingbare Voraussetzung nicht nur für die Schaffung notwendiger Rahmenbedingungen für technologische Innovation, sondern auch für die Ausbildung einer zukünftigen Generation von TechnologInnen, ForscherInnen und DesignerInnen, die sich ihrer gesellschaftlichen Verantwortung bewusst sind.