TITLE
CyberAnthropology – Being human on the internet

AUTHOR **Sprondel, Johanna**
sprondel@rewi.hu-berlin.de; Humboldt - University of Berlin, Faculty of Law, DFG Research Training Group "Multilevel Constitutionalism", Unter den Linden 6 D - 10099 Berlin

Breyer, Thiemo
thiemo.breyer@med.uni -heidelberg.de; University of Heidelberg, Clinic for General Psychiatry, Section "Phenomenological Psychopathology and Psychotherapy", Vosstr. 4 69115 Heidelberg

Wehrle, Maren
maren.wehrle@philosophie.uni -freiburg.de; University of Freiburg, Husserl Archive, Platz der Universität 3, 79098 Freiburg

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Abstract: CyberAnthropology is an approach that submits anthropological and philosophical questions (as well as sociological, political and linguistic questions including questions of constitutional law arising from them) to different fields associated with the internet – which has not been done in this specific transdisciplinary way in previous research. We analyse changes, developments and continuities between the lifeworld of users and new

possibilities of participation on the internet, taking into account different methods given by different disciplines. We also raise the question of how the interaction between us human beings and the medium of the internet can be grasped theoretically and how human behaviours, needs and desires correlate with it practically. CyberAnthropology thus targets the questions of how the human being understands itself and others, how it structures its lifeworld when embedded in virtual environments, in face of the challenges posed by the internet as the dominating medium. Is the internet a new virtual reality or just the representation of old norms and habits? Can we speak of a "cyber citizen" and has the "animal socio-politicum" changed in the light of the internet as a primary form of communication and source of knowledge? How do interest groups form, if one considers the fact that the internet transcends local, regional, national, ethnical and social boundaries? How do new boundaries and normative orders emerge?

So far, the question of how the internet changes societies and the habits of their members has merely been tackled either in abstract terms of media philosophy or in the context of detailed empirical studies of concrete user behaviour. In the first case, the internet is regarded as a self-transforming medium that has had deep consequences on the lives of individuals ever since its emergence and development. What remains unclear, however, is the relationship between the materiality of the internet and its peculiar "message" – for humanity, human responsibility and political action. In the second case, for instance in the research of the "Digital Ethnographers" Michal Wesch and Don Tapscott, the focus lies on the description of virtual phenomena rather than on an analysis that would embed those phenomena in a broader theoretical framework of "virtual reality", which would allow for an application of the outcomes to other

disciplines and fields of research. This is intended by drafting a systematic theory of CyberAnthropology.

Project description

In 1966, Berger & Luckmann began their seminal work on The Social Construction of Reality with the statement: "Since our purpose in this treatise is a sociological analysis of the reality of everyday life, more precisely, of knowledge that guides conduct in everyday life, and we are only tangentially interested in how this reality may appear in various theoretical perspectives to intellectuals, we must begin by a clarification of that reality as it is available to the commonsense of the ordinary members of society." (Berger & Luckmann 1966) This approach to reality as it is subjectively experienced by the members of a society is still a valid methodological starting point for a philosophically informed sociological investigation of social and political processes. The analysis of the lifeworld of individuals and collectives and the ways in which it is shaped by different types of mediation (such as technology) is of central concern today. The intricate interrelations between how people act, think and project their lives in a situation where much of daily communication is mediated by technological devices call for an empirical description and theoretical analysis of the participants' interests and goals and how they are accomplished. The internet is a major source of self-expression and communication in present-day globalised society. An understanding of how the lifeworldly experiences of subjects are transformed and themselves form the basis of their "virtual behaviour" is thus a task not only of research in the domain of media theory, but also in philosophy, sociology, anthropology, political sciences and law. The research project CyberAnthropology targets the questions of how the human being understands itself and others, how it structures its lifeworld when embedded in virtual environments, in face of the challenges posed by the internet as the dominating medium.

Why anthropology? – Previous research and the new approach to CyberAnthropology

The title CyberAnthropology has been used since the mid 1990s to describe a subbranch of social and cultural anthropology that investigates cyberspace as a new domain of ethnographic fieldwork: "As a new domain of anthropological practice, the study of cyberculture is particularly concerned with the cultural construction and reconstruction on which the new technologies are based and which they in turn help to shape." (Escobar 1994, 211) Within this framework, two main areas of research were delineated: information and computer technologies on the one hand, and biotechnologies such as genetic engineering on the other. The focus of ethnographic studies of cyberculture thus focused on how humans create new forms of "technosociality", i.e. social modes of communication and being-with-others that are mediated by technology, as well as "biosociality", i.e. "a new order for the production of life, nature and body" (Escobar 1994, 214).

Within the anthropological discipline, the emphasis on the novelty of how technology influences human life and the call for a new era and methodology of anthropology has raised profound criticism. One could argue that the analysis of the interplay between artificial constructs and the lifeworld has always been at the centre of ethnographic interest when it comes to understanding how people within a specific socio-cultural setting shape their surroundings and understand themselves in the mirror of the artifacts they produce (cf. Krämer 1988). Accordingly, the development of Cyber Anthropology has not lead to a revolutionarily new type of anthropology with the methodological and disciplinary impact it has been tackled so far, but has rather extended the field of application of already existing ethnographic methodologies. According to Hakken

(1999), the "key issues" in the ethnography of cyberspace and cyberculture are the following (cf. Budka & Kremser 2004, 215):

1. The basic characteristics of the entities carrying cyberspace.

2. The self-identities formed by such entities.

3. The micro social relations these entities construct (e.g. with intimates and friends).

4. Their meso social relations (e.g. community, regional, and civil relations).

5. Their macro social relations (e.g. national, transnational).

6. The political and economic structures which cyberspace entities produce and reproduce and which constrain them.

We think that many of the issues raised by social anthropologists discovering the field of cyber culture are still relevant and deserve interdisciplinary attention. Our aim in redefining CyberAnthropology, though, is to ground empirical investigations in the ethnography of cyberspace in a conceptual framework that draws on both media philosophy and philosophical anthropology. In the latter sense, anthropology does not solely refer to the method of analysing human behaviour and thinking with the means of ethnographic fieldwork, i.e. by participant observation, but also to look at the universal features of human creativity, innovation, as well as the production and reproduction of norms. These features are the constituents of a "network society" that makes possible the emergence of new rules, duties and norms in the virtual domain of the internet as a sphere of the lifeworld, but also makes necessary the creation of a global constitution in order to legally ground (and restrict) all the activities in this sphere. CyberAnthropology thus extends the scope of previous research on cyberculture and cyberspace by regarding it not only as an expressive space in which users can fulfil their creative potentials, but also as a legal space in which

user behaviour and its impact on the structure of the web have to be regulated by means of a set of globally valid norms / laws.

More precisely, we wish to engage in the following aspects of this general problem: 1. An anthropological investigation of the internet as a new form of a universal medium for communication and the development of communication network. 2. A reconsideration of how the human being as a creative and expressive being can be determined as a "user": What are the processes of individualisation and collectivisation that contribute to the new internet-identity? What are the extended and multiplied modes of access to reality ("real reality" vs. "real virtuality")? 3. A social philosophical as well as legal consideration of the political implications of the new forms of interaction and collective identity-construction.

The Internet – A new virtual reality or a "real virtuality"

Nearly 50 years after Marshall McLuhan (1964) insisted that 'the medium is the message' and more than 20 years after Friedrich Kittler (1985) argued that the materialisation of a medium should be seen as the real message, the World Wide Web nowadays is about to surpass the traditional notion of media altogether. The internet as a metaphor for virtual space contains all kinds of information and representations previous media provided irrespective of how and where they were implemented. Via portable internet we can now email, chat with people in real time, watch TV, listen to the radio, post pictures and videos, or search for information about things and situations we are currently experiencing in the real world. The internet and its vast range of applications is therefore more than just a mass media: it is a "communication fabrique of our lives" (Castells 2010, xxvi), which can be used for work-related issues, personal connectivity, information,

entertainment, public services and political engagement. Since the connection to the internet went mobile, we no longer have to sit in front of a real world object called 'computer', tethered by cables. The frontiers between the real world and the mediated virtual world are becoming blurred: "The network [is] with us, on us, all the time." (Turkle 2011, xii) – And at any place, one might want to add.

In this context it is worth asking if it is still appropriate to speak of a 'virtual reality' in contrast to a 'real reality', or if we see ourselves confronted with a new culture of 'real virtuality' (Castells 2010, xxxii) as Manuel Castells suggested. If we take a look at 'information fabriques' like smartphones, it is as though McLuhan was right in pointing out that electronic media should be seen as an extension of man (cf. McLuhan 2003). A similar thought was developed by the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty who defined technology (e.g. material tools like glasses or walking sticks) as an extension of the body-schema (Merleau-Ponty 1945). Both conceptions emphasize that there is no strict dichotomy between subject and object, nature and technology (cf. Haraway's notion of 'cyborgs'). The same holds for the difference between real and virtual. There are as many virtual/imaginary aspects in (real) human perception (like anticipations from memory, cf. Noë 2004) as there are real aspects in virtuality. Both categories are integral parts of human lifeworlds.

The perpetual connectivity provides us with different modes of access to the 'world' in parallel: While experiencing something in our immediate environment, we are able to extend our perspective. We can obtain meta-information from the internet as an intersubjective source of knowledge. By doing so, we acquire a double position: we are at the same time in our bodily/subjective here-and-now and part of a quasi-objective sphere of knowledge which goes far beyond our

individual experience. In this integration of different accesses to the world, made possible through the internet, the *virtual* nature of the human being – as defined by the philosophical anthropologist Helmuth Plessner – is clearly demonstrated: his *excentric positionality* (Plessner 1928).

Therefore, the questions we have to ask about what it means to be human on the internet are rather about the individual subjective standpoint – "local" aspects – and collective information/networks – global aspects – than about the dichotomy between real and virtual life. Although the two domains are intertwined in the lifeworlds of humans, a proper *description* of the phenomena captured by the categories of "real life" and "virtual life" are still needed. Otherwise the different influences and interplays cannot be grasped. As the medium itself becomes more and more hidden/invisible as an extended part of the self (for example as external memory), not the medium in its materiality is of interest, but *how is it employed*. Here, the real-world problems, interests, needs and motivations of the users are coming to the fore. The selection criteria with which we start our search for information or the motivations that make us decide to take part in a social network are generated in our individual history of experience, which includes our social and cultural backgrounds. On the one hand, internet usage depends on local criteria such as social and economic milieus and education. On the other hand, the global network is extending and changing the 'local' lifeworld of subjects. Furthermore, the internet not only offers manifold services, information and social networks that can be individually selected and made use of, but also makes it possible for everyone – who has the informational skills – to actively develop new contents. Therefore, it enables us not only to connect to a virtual community, but also to create our own (virtual) environment. Even though this

can never – and this is vital – exceed our real life abilities, which are still the grounds for any "virtual living", it can develop and complete them.

Identity-making on the net: The human being as user

From its very beginning, the internet was a projection space for desires, ideals, visions and fears of all sorts. On the one hand, it was subjected to a pessimistic critique, which described it as a dissolving force or an absolute form of simulation (Baudrillard 1978, Bolz 1990). On the other hand, it was praised as a vision of a free and democratic dimension of plural identities independent of old norms, categories and power structures such as race, gender and social background (Turkle 1985, Haraway 1991, Stone 1991, Bath 2002). Back in the 1990s, both sides argued that the categories of sensual experience like body and space will no longer play a role in this new virtual reality. But neither the prophesised loss of a sense of reality and face-to-face social life, nor the predicted escape from the body, typical gender identities, norms and rules did occur (cf. Funken 2000, 2002). Suggestions made by Donna Haraway, among others, namely that the anonymity in virtual space goes along with the fact that people escape their embodied selves and the behavioural norms of everyday life have been refuted with reference to the behaviour within social networks like *Facebook*. Instead of escaping the bonds of real world identities, one could see a strong constraint to a definite positioning and stereotypic self-expression in social networks (cf. Zurawski 2000, Nakamura 1995, 2002).

Studies about earlier internet activities like *Multi User Dungeons* (MUDs), *chat rooms*, *role games* and virtual realities like *Second Life* (2003) have already shown the importance of the body as well as the adoption of social norms and typical gender identities. Instead of affirming the separation of identity from fixed

physical embodiment, as represented in the poststructuralist hope for the deconstruction of essentialism, the analyses of computer-mediated communication reveal the users' striving for *authenticity*. In a purely text based reality, authenticity, trust and ethical responsibility are the main social currency, which is obtained by expressing a stable identity with the help of bodily images, emotions and stereotypical gender identities. For this purpose, emoticons and sensual metaphors are used (Slater 1998, Lübke 2005). The virtual representation of the body is necessary for communication and social acceptance in the virtual world, because it is a trustful reference-point. The same holds true for the dimension of space: A specific spatial or thematic placing of an online activity is needed, for instance a chat-room. In the realm of computer games and virtual realities, spatial structures are also essential for orientation. New rooms and social spaces mark the entry into new situations or game levels with new rules and duties. The construction of well-defined rooms and regions has the function of structuring an otherwise meaningless field experience. Body representations and lived space thus have an orienting function and provide the basis for social reliability (Funken 2004).

In times of *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *MySpace*, the aspects of authenticity, social reliability and most of all social acknowledgement and feedback are more important than ever. Pictures and videos that document the real lifeworld of the user are replacing attempts to construct new virtual spaces and identities. The so called *Web 2.0* is like a virtual market place where you can posit and exchange meanings, keep in contact with friends and be constantly updated about gossip and public news. Moreover, it is used as a medium for image cultivation and business networking. So you can conclude with Michael Hardey that "as the use of the internet has grown it has become increasingly used in ways that are

grounded in pre-existing social and economic processes" (Hardey 2002, 583). Actual online studies about the use of the internet confirm this tendency: Active participation – in the sense of designing new webpages and and virtual realities – has continually decreased and the net is used predominantly for checking emails, goal-oriented search of information and communication in social networks (ARD/ZDF Online Study 2010). "Rather than visions of another life-world occupied with users with multiple identities the internet for many is just a different space where they may meet others and make use of a vast number of services and resources" (Hardey 2002, 583). Nonetheless, this is not a settled question, but has to be taken as an empirical challenge to continuously analyse and compare user behaviour. As the latest "Hype Cycle" indicates, platforms such as *Second Life* are again gaining prominence.

If the internet is mostly used in a selective and goal-oriented way, as is demonstrated in current research, and if this selective use has its roots in the everyday life of its users, then the question "how and why people turn to the internet" (Hardey 2002, 582) must be raised. In order to analyse the underlying motivations that guide the selective use of the internet, we have to take a look at the 'real lifeworlds' of users. In this regard, factors like social environment, educational background and culture have an important impact. Apart from the first digital divide, which separates the ones who have technical access to the new media from the ones who do not, there seems to be a second divide that characterises the way in which people use and actively participate in the internet (Norris 2001, ALLBUS Study 2004, Segev & Ahituv 2010). Only some have the interest and the programming skills to actively design and initiate new web structures or the education and interests to launch a new political group. The majority of people use the internet only for keeping track of the news, checking

emails or searching for specific information with the help of searching tools like *Google*. The range of visited websites is gradually shrinking, "more online users visit fewer websites" (Segev 2010, xxii; Waxman 2000). Due to mechanisms like *tagging*, *bookmarking* and *individualised advertising*, there is a tendency to be only presented with information that fit personal interests: In this sense, instead of the hopes that the internet will lead to an extension of local horizons, we receive only custom-fit information and thus literally get stuck in the same old discourses. Which pages we actually visit, which groups we join and newsletters we subscribe to, depends on our already existing interests (Wehrle & Breyer, under review), which are generated in our personal (real) world history.

New forms of interactions: interest-groups and collective identities

The radically new thing about the internet is that we can share these interests with millions of people regardless of actual localisation. In comparison to other social peer groups, these *interest-groups* are not necessarily characterised by spatial neighbourhood, but are mostly defined by a solely thematic focus shared by the members. The thematic focus that motivates the joining in or building up of a special group can thereby be private, e.g. considering fields of interest like music, arts and film, or driven by more public interests, as to be found in concerns like political groups or engagements for or against current local events. Although in network society of the interne it is difficult to strictly separate the private sphere from the public or political sphere. Both forms of interest-groups are essential for the self-expression and identity-making of the subject and/or user. While the presenting of and referring to favourite singers, bands, films or VIPs, for example in social networks, is – at least intended to be – expressing a certain kind of individuality of the user, the joining of political groups serves the purpose of a collective identity in a more explicit way. Regardless of whether thematic

focus is at the heart of an interest-group, it is at the same time strengthening an internal unity and establishing boundaries towards – or even an exclusion – of other opinions, interests and institutions: "Identity requires differences in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty." (Connolly 2002, 64; for the postmodern criticism on *identity politics*, cf. also Butler 1993)

In this sense identity-making on the net is in no way different from identity-making in the "real world" and bears the same problems: How to find a voice (in form of a collective identity) for representing the interests of minorities without drifting towards the dangers of essentialism. As soon as a quasi-substantial and universal identity is assumed for the women, the Africans or the homosexuals, the same patterns of exclusion that originally created the problem are re-instantiated.

Nonetheless the process of identifying with specific groups is necessary for social networking and political participation, especially on the internet. As shown above there is neither a deletion of "real world" categories like space, body or gender in favour of a virtual reality of postmodern dreams, nor is there a strict opposition between the local position of an embodied subject and the global networks on the internet. We have no opposition of the self and the net, as Manuel Castells (2010) suggested. Quite to the contrary, the concept of the constitution of the self – not in the definition of *minimal self* (Gallagher & Zahavi 2010), but as *narrative* (Ricoeur 1990) or *discursive* self (Foucault 2001, Butler 1993) – which formerly was something merely abstract – is now made visible: The self and its discursive character is materialising itself through its self-expressions and interactions with others on the net.

The novelty of identity-making and political engagement on the net consists in the special characteristic of what we call interest-groups. They are not only limited in relation to their topic, but also with regard to the time course of their existence. Especially the political engagements for current local events are limited in time. In comparison to classical and lifelong civil engagements in corporations, clubs or societies, the duration and activity of some interest-groups (e.g. against plagiarism, the persecution or conviction of particular persons or even the protest against the building of a new train station in Stuttgart, Germany) is dependent on the up-to-date-ness of the corresponding event. They emerge from current real world problems, which unifies different subject positions from a detachedness of the *"I"* into a (virtual) *temporary "us"*, a "patchwork of minorities" (Lyotard 1977). This process is a form of identity-making that is not universalist or essentialist; rather we could call it a strategic-essentialist operation, in which an collective identity is temporarily adopted to achieve a specific common goal.

The far-reaching possibilities of networking and organising online and real-world campaigns to promote the themes of the interest-group are immense. Hence interest groups form differently nowadays and do have a different, thus global impact. But although the internet transcends local, regional, national, continental, ethnical and social boundaries, there are many pre-conditions such as education and social participation that must be fulfilled in the real lifeworld before a motivation for political or other forms of interest will actually develop.

On the following point Sherry Turkle was right: On the internet we could have many and multiple (partial) identities, even in parallel. But they are in no way independent of our subjective standpoint, social and cultural milieu in the real world. All the different individual political interests and social roles have to be

woven into a coherent life-story, the constitution of a self is therefore never completed.

As far as political, social and constitutional aspects are concerned, the two-plane aspect can not be underestimated, since here the impact of the anthropologic aspect of the internet meets up with questions of norms, human dignity or questions as a "right to communicate". On the one hand, the internet is thus a tool for extending our self-images, enrich our knowledge and communicate with others – a graphic materialisation of former invisible discourses and a performative iteration of our already existing lifeworlds and social milieus. On the other hand, this performance is constantly influencing our way of experiencing and speaking about the 'real world', thus modifying our everyday lifeworld, in which the new media already is an integral part.

Real Virtual – Imbedding the virtual into the real and the real into the virtual

When looking for a method to grasp the way in which the internet is not only a medium whose interaction is reduced to the virtual reality, but a medium accepted and adapted to broaden one's horizon and to deepen one's knowledge and thereby also to have impact on our personal lifeworld and history, one might turn to text-hermeneutics. Even if the internet does not necessarily have to be considered as a document, an archive, a "trace" (to speak with Derrida) in the classical meaning, the question arises, how actual exchange of knowledge, processes of identity-making and the broadening of one's horizon on the internet take place. Considering a hermeneutic approach seems to be gainful here.

This would imply considering *real life* as a form of *pre-figuration* (action) that is then being selected, taken into account, brought into an order and described in an act of *configuration* when living a *virtual life* on the internet. Be it in texts, movies, chats, *Facebook* entries, forums or simply when participating in any of the multiple ways of dialogue the internet offers (and even *Second Life* can be counted in here). This will finally lead to the act of *re-figuration* (reception of the described) that can influence and alter the recipient's behaviour and lead to a new stage of *pre-figuration* (action) and thereby imply changes in *real life*.

The criteria for action and reception are, as we have argued before, given by sociological, educational, behavioural, cultural, and other, so to speak, anthropological dispositions. By these dispositions the human being decides what to focus on, what to realise, what to interpret in which manner and under which assumptions. A divergence is hereby just as interesting as the matching of virtual and real identity and can indicate changes in attitude, social norms, or political circumstances etc. This is also why this method appears to fit well with our research interest. And by applying it to a global medium, we hope to be able to depict a larger context of how interaction – ideally as well as practically – can be explained and thought through on a global level. This is due to the fact that from a phenomenological point of view, higher-order norms are always founded in certain normal modes of appearance on the lower levels of experience. This is to say that there is a logical as well as temporal primacy of the normality of the lifeworld and its structures compared to the normative orders emerging from them. In line with this general philosophical point about the relationship between normality and normativity (cf. Wehrle 2010), the notion of a comparison between normative power of the factual and the virtual can give us an idea of how the factuality / facticity of the lifeworld with its interest structures at the same time

found our patterns of "virtual behaviour" and is shaped by the way we navigate in cyberspace. Thus we can analyse constitutional developments as well as political developments, developments of norms and also developments of ideas like citizenship. And we can also make an approach to scrutinize the question of convergence withing decision-making, culture and a history of ideas, led by the dualism of adaptation and divergence.

By using the conceptual trias of *pre-figuration*, *configuration* and *re-figuration* as well as the idea of an highly influential transmission of *real life* values, ideas, matters and habits to *virtual life*, we cling to the idea of a hermeneutic circle of mimesis and the nomenclature of Paul Ricoeur (1983) in the succession of Hans-Georg Gadamer. But we are detaching his method from the restriction to texts, arguing that it is no longer only the interpretation of *written* documents that funds our culture, but taking into account latest technological developments and their impact on our life and the formation of narratives. We can observe how our lifeworld is, on the one hand, increasingly documented on the internet and, on the other hand, influenced by our reception and interpretation of what we find there; in daily life issues but also as far as processes of law-making and politics are concerned. We collect information on the internet, we compare outcomes of law-suits on the internet, we run campaigns on the internet, we advertise ideas and individuals, we save archives on the internet, we let the internet influence our decisions and processes of decision-making. And we build our identity in doing so. And not only in a dimension of *Second Life* or social networking, but also by the mere act of *telling* something. So the internet might just well be considered another form to "enrichir la notion de mise en intrigue" (Ricoeur 1984, 72ff.) and the approach of text-hermeneutics might require a careful revision and broadening in the 21st century.

Research agenda

On the basis of a set of key research fields we want to arrange the agenda of our project on *CyberAnthropology* around these sets of questions:

1.   *Norms in virtual life*

How are existing norms expressed on the internet? Is the process of developing and modifying norms on the internet comparable to that in "non-virtual" life? What are the mechanisms of codifying norms on the internet? Are we tolerating the same things in real and virtual life?

2.   *Internet usage: Attention and selective criteria*

How does the 'real' social environment (lifeworld) generate attentional structures through habitualities and interests that guide our selective use of the internet? How are the selective criteria in internet usage differentiated according to socio-cultural groups? How do these attentive structures change and can they be manipulated? How can they be used for the development and stabilization of global constitutional forms and laws?

3.   *Perception and expression of self, others and social groups*

Are there rules of self-perception and self-expression for the internet? How does the perception of self and other change due to the internet? How does our perception in "real life" interact with that of the internet? How important are terms like "gender", "identity", "alterity" in Web 2.0? How is the freedom granted by the internet to constitute an "alter-ego" used and abused and how do mechanisms of social selection and sanction work?

4.   Interaction of lifeworld and internet: Development of new habits, social and political networks

Does the internet change our habits of perceiving, searching, choosing, voting? Does it change our language or does it just add a different terminology to our language? Does it influence our methods when it comes to research? Can we observe a change in patterns of political processes that is extending across boarders and political cultures? And would all this apply also to "real life" or do we have a "alter-habit" that we just act out online?

This leads us to the following research sections:

The social construction of virtual reality: Interactions between lifeworld and the internet

If we follow Berger & Luckmann to believe that there is no such thing as an essence of reality independent of its social construction and the way it is perceived and shaped by socialised agents, then the question for our purposes is how the development and spread of the internet has a structuring effect on the lifeworld of individuals. Which interests that are already present in lifeworldly experience are expanded, inhibited, radicalised or otherwise modified by the internet and which interests are first and foremost provoked in encounters with contents provided by the internet? This section mainly addresses research-fields of attentional structures of internet usage (2) and (4) the influences of the internet on our lifeworld. Connected with this is also the question of the genesis and modification of norms through the internet (1).

A virtual "Menschenbild"?

If we require an anthropological account to include a critical reflection on the history of the images of humanity that were produced and purported in specific socio-cultural contexts, we are lead to ask, when it comes to the internet: What kind of "Menschenbild" is sketched on and through the internet? Is it reasonable to search for a general answer to this question at all – or is not precisely the recognition of a lacking vision of what humanity amounts to in the age of virtual globalisation the key to an understanding of the internet? If so, a task would be to describe the process of deconstruction of a unified model of being human and to analyse seemingly diverse, multi-faceted and delocalised images from a comparative point of view. How, one would have to ask, are traditional anthropological views on human nature challenged, modified, distorted and perhaps even eradicated in the course of the uprise of the internet as a new medium of being human? Research-fields (1) and (3) are of importance here.

Animal socio-politicum: Close encounters of the virtual kind

Taking the social nature of being human as a point of departure, it is interesting to see how unmediated, direct forms of interpersonal conduct and communication are complemented and in various respects overshadowed by internet-mediated relations between individuals. On the one hand, the internet provides a vast array of means to express oneself on a personal as well as political level, a stage for self-representation and publicly available profile-information about oneself. One the other hand, these seemingly individualistic methods of projecting a virtual image of the self is also employed to establish different kinds of social contact, peer-group coherence and political activity. Through platforms like a personalised homepage, forums such as *YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter* and the like, every internet user basically has the same means to give the virtual public an

impression of themselves, of their likes and dislikes, artistic attitudes, political opinions and in the case of image galleries such as *Flickr* or *Picasa* also autobiographic memories. We more and more become aware of diverging as well as converging processes in our daily live, transgressing boarders, I doing so. New methods of individualisation thus arise, including the possibility of connecting personal political opinions to an emerging virtual political public. As the recent revolution in Egypt shows, internet messaging services like *Twitter* can build up political movements just by spreading personal experiences and political opinions. Thereby, a new (global) mode of access and international attention to relevant topics pertaining to the situation of the users is created, going beyond the traditional means of news broadcasting and journalism. This demonstrates that the methods of self-expression do not serve a solipsistic goal, but aim at others in the virtual community who are willing to share personal information, which can then attain the status of overall political importance. The broader use of the internet for political campaigns overall (as for example during the election campaign by Barack Obama) is no more the privilege of authorities.

The claim that the internet is first and foremost a social medium, not an individualistic one, is also corroborated by the existence of manifold platforms on which individuals can explicitly create ties with others. Correlatively to the new means of (individual) self-expression, the internet creates a sphere for the establishment of interpersonal and collective and political identities as well as a stage for acting out what can become the prerequisite of "real" encounters. This section brings together the research-fields (3) and (4).

Research questions

1. Is there a way to think global / common political /constitutional identity of cyber citizens without abstracting from the local, individual subject position?

2. How (in which contexts, form which individual standpoints) do interests and needs develop and merge into a common political engagement?

3. How can we re-conceptualise the human being as a creative and expressive being in terms of a "user"? And is a "user" always the same "user" throughout time and virtual space? Or must we assume a silent metamorphosis of the "user"?

4. What are the processes of individualisation and collectivisation that contribute to the new internet-identity?'

5. What are the social, legal and political implications of the new forms of interaction and collective identity-construction enabled by the internet?

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