

Vorwort

Editorial

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This edition of the *Interculture Journal* looks to bring together a number of concepts: cyber-utopianism/dystopianism, cosmopolitan and authoritarian currents, and tentatively introduces the term *digital interculturality*. The intellectual logic underpinning this conceptual combination firstly requires a degree of explanation, before introducing the articles that have responded to our call.

Utopia/Dystopia

In colloquial terms, the word utopian has often been used as an insult designating a sense of ‘unreality’ and naivety to certain (political) ideas. But such usage does an undoubted disservice to a term that retains a complex and multifaceted intellectual history.

Schölderle (2017:12f) has divided thinking on the concept into three larger categories: 1) classical utopianism, 2) social-psychological use of the term and 3) the totalitarian-theoretical orientation that veers strongly towards dystopia. The classical usage of the term has always been focussed on Thomas More – the creator of the word – and his 1516 novel and sees utopia as the literary conjuring of a (subjectively-imagined) ideal state from which existent reality may be critiqued. Notwithstanding the fact of course that More’s Utopia island paradise – “the best [society] in the world” as one of his main characters tells us (More 1997:81) – is also facilitated by slave labour. The best-known proponent of the social-psychological utopia concept

is probably Ernst Bloch (1959). Bloch sees utopia as a type of consciousness or intention – “das Prinzip Hoffnung” or principle of hope – thus greatly expanding the parameters of the term’s usage. According to Bloch, hoping is not just interpretation but a form of “agieren” or action, while hope in the world is materialized via human striving (Müller-Schöll / Vidal 2017:11f), and it is within human striving where, he believes, utopianism is to be clearly seen. On the other hand, Karl Popper (1986:6), writing in the post-World War 2 period, saw the idea of utopia and what he calls the “utopian method” as linked intrinsically to violence and totalitarianism, understood as actually thus a counter-utopia or dystopia. As we cannot determine the ultimate ends of political actions scientifically and using rational argument, the author reasons, utopianism becomes a type of religion forcefully imposed by violence (1986:6). Popper (1986:10) believes instead in a type of gradualism, in making “life a little less terrible and a little less unjust in each generation”. Popper’s utopia concept is thus actually akin to the *dystopian* literary landscapes of authors such as George Orwell and Aldous Huxley. We see utopianism in the same manner as Schölderle (2017:17), as distinct from futurism – which looks for an accurate prognosis of the future, without judgement – while utopian thinking, on the other hand, generally retains a clear normative character.

Intercultural Communication and Utopianism

Tentative arguments have been made for the subject of intercultural communication to acquire a more explicit “moral vision” beyond mere description (Busch / Möller-Kiero 2016:55); arguments essentially for a partial normative critique. Intercultural communication, it can at least be argued, has always been intertwined with perhaps vague ideas concerning the betterment of intercultural understanding, and thus a ‘better world’ – it has always implicitly been centred upon an idea of *utopia*, albeit a gradualist rather than revolutionary type of “Prinzip Hoffnung” (Bloch 1959), a materialization of human striving. Whether the end product, in terms of scholarship and teaching, has furthered a type of economic neo-liberal “banal nationalism” (Billig 1995) and where exactly this is to be situated on an (admittedly somewhat crude) utopia-dystopia binary is a complex and context-dependent question, which other observers are welcome to judge. But this remains a pertinent question, nonetheless. How scholarly intercultural communication itself relates to, and may support, another highly important utopian materialization of human striving, namely democracy, also remains an important question of distinctly increasing relevance.

Cyber-Utopianism, Cosmopolitanism and Authoritarianism

Intercultural communication and ideas of interculturality have of course been, at least traditionally, intertwined with questions of language as a symbolic system and creator of meaning, but should now be seen, as Nazarkiewicz (2018:82) has also argued, as deeply intertwined with digitality and communicative Internet technologies. The four editors of this volume would like to label this complex merging of the digital and the intercultural as *digital interculturality*, seeing this as the hyper interculturality of the digital world with its potential for a myriad of new and

diverse connections, a web of digital uncertainty in which interculturalities are constantly transformed into more certain culturalities: A situation full of both great potentiality and danger. The editors of this volume remain aware however that digital interculturality, as a concept, still requires a thorough theorization (which we indeed intend to undertake).

Discussing the utopian concepts of Bloch and Popper, Jean Améry (1980:98) refers to the “technische-szientistische [sic] Utopie” as retaining ideological elements of the “Bestehenden”, the already existing, and thus as inherently gradualist. But the first US authors conceptualizing the Internet and the world wide web certainly saw this differently. The cyber-utopian Barlow (1996) famously told his online readers that he came from “Cyberspace, the new home of mind” with “no elected government” but consisting of “transactions, relationships, and thought itself”; “a global social space we are building”. Barlow’s vision represents an anarcho-cosmopolitan spatial imaginary typical of American cyber-thought of the 1990s and the early 2000s (Turner 2006:11ff), which merged counter-cultural elements and techno-utopianism. While US thinkers dreamed in terms of an extended freedom and new online forms of democratic-globality, German thinkers largely, as Humer (2020:6) notes, viewed the same technology more cautiously in Popperian terms, as representing the potential “Verdatung des Menschen”; the datafication of personhood that could possibly lead into a type of totalitarianism.

The Internet also offered of course a potential means to redefine and maybe even improve ‘intercultural relations’ (however one wants to define or perceive this). This was, at least, a view held in the earlier stages of Internet technologies. For Castells (2004:40) the new network logic underpinning the online world would result in wi-

der access to the “joy of diversity” and thus “ending the ancestral fear of the other”. Ess (2001:4) wrote of the possibility of a “genuinely intercultural global village” but also warned that the “ostensibly cosmopolitan” nature of the new technologies hid their actual ethnocentricity, their largely US origin (Ess 2001:18). Later authors have critiqued cyber-utopian visions, suggesting that such arguments failed to anticipate “how authoritarian governments would respond to the Internet” (Morozov 2011:xiv). Nagle (2017:3) has even suggested that the Castells’ vision of decentralized online power and unfettered citizen journalism, uncontrolled by gatekeepers, has come about – but in white-nationalist, alt-right form. Strick (2021:11f) has taken these ideas further and has written about the alt-right in terms of what he calls a “reflexive” “digital fascism”, in which ideas of racism, sexism and antisemitism appear as part of a feeling-oriented lifestyle, as an aspect of online youth and counter-culture. Indeed this often involves the inversion of the accusation of fascism, the alternative online right often seeing the others as fascists and themselves as victims (Strick 2021:117).

As already stated, a utopia-dystopia binary is perhaps somewhat crude, but it is a binary opposition that still actually dominates academic Internet Studies – and perhaps understandably so. In the preface to a recent handbook on Internet research, the editors write:

“The individuals and communities that use the internet, including researchers, can easily see it as both uniting people into groups and yet also polarizing those groups against one another. There are people exploring a wide variety of goods via the internet, trying to unite the world and make it a better place, and some seeking to do a great deal of evil through for instance exploitation of data and strategic dissemination of misinformation” (Hunsinger / Allen / Klaststrup 2020:v).

A clear utopia-dystopia dichotomy is evident here in this characterization of Internet usage and research and, while utopias and dystopias may perhaps be seen in terms of visionary-theoretical ‘absolutes’, many realities exist between these theoretical ‘poles’, and the utilization of such ‘poles’ may help us to pragmatically chart these existent realities. Utopias themselves are also of course embedded in language. As Foucault (1994:xviii) states, “utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language”. Paul Ricoeur (1971) has famously argued that actions may be seen as “text”, as the meanings of actions may be hermeneutically read. The opposite is also surely true and the *writing* of text, especially online text-creation in its various forms, may also be seen in terms of action; not least when wider online text-creation relates to ideas of group formation, processes of inclusion and exclusion, and the creation of culturalities with a sense of certainty from interculturalities without a sense of certainty – the very stuff of intercultural communication, therefore. This is where our special issue is to be situated; among the wider textual creation of utopian and dystopian visions, as well as online textual actions entangled with wider processes of inclusion and exclusion.

The Articles in the Special Edition

This special edition was edited by **Fergal Lenehan, Luisa Conti, Roman Lietz** and **Milene Mendes de Oliveira**, the four core members of the research co-operative “ReDICO: Researching Digital Interculturality Co-operatively”, financed by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research within the “Kleine Fächer: Zusammen stark” programme. The edition is bilingual, but a special effort has been made to have as many English-language articles as possible; not in the spirit of an aggressive Anglicization, but as an attempt at greater inclusion as English may be seen, for good or for ill, as the global academic lingua franca. The

edition includes, thus, seven articles in English and three in German, which in addition offer a variety of disciplinary perspectives. The cover contains an original image by the artist **Akemi Paz**.

In his article **Fergal Lenehan** offers us a conceptualization of postdigital cosmopolitanisms, drawing on the scientific writings on this area from the past twenty years. He argues ultimately in favour of a normative – and utopian – postdigital cosmopolitanism, which looks to re-imagine aspects of the Internet, while also arguing for the usefulness of the cosmopolitan concept in the context of the Internet and interculturality. Literary scholar **Nicole Brandstetter**, on the other hand, examines fictional utopian-dystopian depictions of digitalization and artificial intelligence and how they relate to humaneness and society. She argues ultimately that the protagonists in the works she cites may be seen as representations of a self-alienated Otherness in dehumanized, optimized and efficiency-driven societies. Based on interview material conducted with programmers from one of the most important global producers of algorithms, GitHub, **Emilian Franco** investigates the coders' future imaginary and how this relates to algorithmic production, charting these imaginaries on a utopian-dystopian scale. His ultimate argument is that the "coding Prometheus" seems rather blind to possible dystopias. Drawing on the intellectual history of cybernetics and Armin Nassehi's work *Theorie der digitalen Gesellschaft* (Theory of Digital Society), **Thomas Winklmeier** discusses the ideological foundations of the Internet and the conditions responsible for its development. The discourse surrounding Internet technologies, he believes, functions as a type of myth and the Internet features *both* utopian and/or dystopian potentiality.

Julian Biskamp and **Roman Lietz** engage with questions of racism and counter-racism within online comic-book fan culture. Drawing on Critical Race Theory concerning media recep-

tion, the authors explain the special conditions of online fandom and illustrate recent developments and current discussions regarding representation and (cyber-)racism in the Marvel Universe. **Yolanda López García** explores the hateful and solidarity-driven online reactions directed towards Yalitza Aparicio, the first Indigenous woman nominated for Best Actress at the Oscar Awards for the film *Roma* (2018). She argues that these comments reveal the entanglement between the imaginaries of coloniality and Mexicanness embedded in everyday life, while also, on the other hand, showing the reconfiguration of the (digital) imagined community in Mexico. **Cornelia Bogen** engages with the outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic in China and the nationalist discourse which emerged across leading social networks, portraying female medical personnel as self-sacrificing heroines. Female online activists, she argues, questioned this discourse and raised attention to patriarchal structures within Chinese society, but these counter-discourses were either censored by algorithmic forms of social control, or ignored by mainstream media. **Carmen Pereyra** investigates the online communication of 'El Paraiso Verde', a (de-territorialized) nationalist gated community for German-speakers in Paraguay. She argues that digital media play a crucial role in providing a platform that serves the modern need for self-design, creating a sense of agency and reinforcing the national project as a matter of autonomy-seeking.

Alina Jugenheimer analyzes intersections between antifeminist discourse and online conspiracy theories. She argues that, on the website Sciencefiles.org, conspiracy ideology is directly incorporated and an alleged threat to democracy is constructed, which may be seen as paralleling antifeminist discourse which features the idea of a fight for liberation from a supposedly omnipotent feminism and genderism. **Luisa Conti**, **Milene Mendes de Oliveira** and **Barbara Nietzel**'s article is based

upon a study of more than a hundred people of several nationalities in the on-line simulation game 'Megacities' and centres on how a genuine 'Miteinander' was created. Based on reflection sheets written by the participants themselves, the authors suggest that language choice and the virtual setting of communication were central to the creation of a sense of cohesion, arguing ultimately for the increased and more reflective use of the Internet in the movement towards a universal 'Miteinander'.

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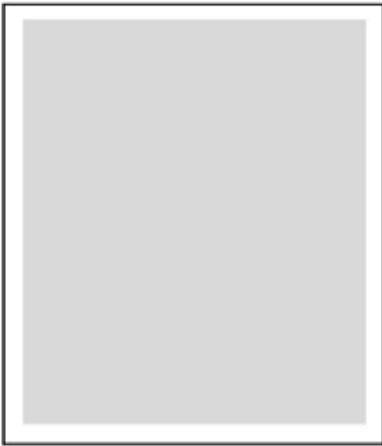
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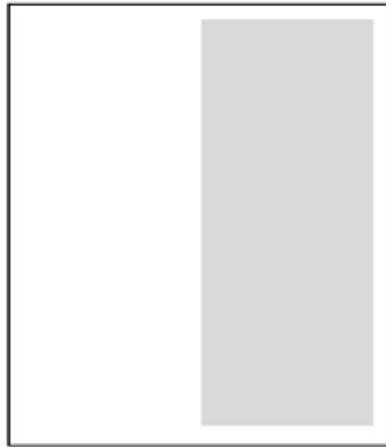
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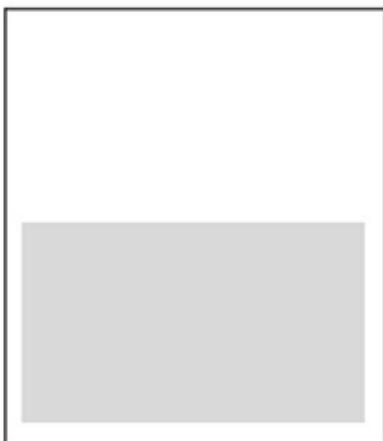
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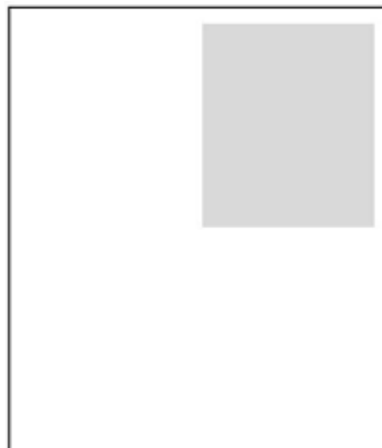
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Keywords: Relational cultural and communication studies, cooperation in contexts of cultural complexity, transcultural and relational competence
- 3. Relational View on Management** Wednesday Sept. 7th, 2022
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