Introduction

Approaches to New Technologies in American Studies: Programmatic Considerations

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Technology tends to represent a thrust toward the future, an accelerated promise of microrefined systems and networks, deeper probes into the way we live and think. Technology claims the future on our behalf.

—Don DeLillo, “Introduction: Assassination Aura” (viii)

Founded in 1956 as the official journal of the German Association for American Studies (GAAS), Amerikastudien / American Studies is currently at a crossroads. With this first open-access issue, and with two new General Editors, a new editorial board, and a new advisory board, the journal has completed a long transformation process, accompanied by intense, diverse, and comprehensive debate, from a yearbook to a quarterly and from a printed hardcopy archived digitally via the firewall-protected JSTOR database to an open-access digital journal. “Finally,” some will say; “why now,” others will wonder; “why at all,” a few will ask. Reactions to this most recent step have been as manifold and emotionally charged as the debates around digitization in (and the digitization of) education itself. Touching on themes such as online publishing, open-access availability, the role of social media for academic research, and the use of new technologies in the classroom, these debates have often resulted in oppositional framings of phenomena as either “good” or “bad” (if not outright “evil”), with arguments frequently driven by moral rather than reasoned, and normative rather than descriptive, claims. The new editors of Amerikastudien / American Studies are well aware of these polarizations.

Following the mandate of the German Association for American Studies, we have made a commitment to seeing the journal through a transition that will, we believe, substantially increase its accessibility and distribution range while building on its rich traditions and its previous editors’ impressive achievements in developing a publication of international renown and four-digit subscription numbers. We will do our best to continue the outstanding work of our predecessors, most recently
Oliver Scheiding, Udo Hebel, and Alfred Hornung and their respective teams, and we would like to express our profound gratitude to them for developing *Amerikastudien / American Studies* into a strong, internationally renowned forum for academic exchange. We aim to make the journal even more international, more widely available to emerging scholars, and more diverse in its collaborations with different disciplines, traditions, and discourses within and beyond the GAAS. An open-access journal can reach beyond the limitations of analogue accessibility and offers opportunities for engagement and dialogue to American Studies scholars across disciplines, generations, and nations, and thus promises new opportunities on several levels.

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As a recent issue of *PMLA* reveals, “new education” has become a buzzword, one that has eclipsed and in a sense absorbed an older fixation on “new technologies”—new education, in contemporary usage, seems always to refer to an approach to education based both on new technologies and a shift from the “teacher” to the “coach” as a model of appropriate classroom authority (“On Cathy N. Davidson”). American Studies, as a central site of this debate, has played a substantial role in both mirroring and shaping these developments within and beyond the humanities and social sciences. With this first, programmatic issue of our newly designed journal and in the volumes to come, we aim at integrating these debates and responsibilities into an agenda of intellectual exchange, with a special focus on the ways in which new technologies and “new education” transform, broaden, and diversify our discipline.

The opportunities are manifold: as Jeffrey Schnapp argues in this issue, open-access formats can be central to “the democratization of access to expert knowledge in all domains.” Researchers know all too well the frustrations of looking for an article in the one issue of a print journal that happens to be missing from the library stacks, or of the extra time it takes to access the most recent issues, which are often still at the book-binder’s or held up by the library’s cataloging and classification procedures. Many of the major digital databases, including *JSTOR*, *ProQuest*, and *Project MUSE*, are not available at less-generously funded universities, and the institutional organization and distribution of academic resources becomes even more asymmetrical when larger geographical and geopolitical frameworks are taken into account. Open-access journals thus dramatically increase both readers’ access to structured knowledge and authors’ visibility, range of impact, and global connectivity. Furthermore, the digitization of data allows for the development not only of digital archives, “counter-archives[,] and alternative public spheres” (Dunst and Mischke 132), but also of new research methods and new questions, as searches for specific themes or keywords are not only more efficient when done electronically, but also sometimes yield surprising
parallels or completely unforeseen results. From Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s concept of “Digital Palimpsest Mapping Projects” (2011) to Frank Mehring’s “Digital Photographic Grammar” (2018), the scholarly uses of algorithms to structure and analyze materials has been fundamentally diversified since the first issue of Computers and the Humanities was published in 1966 (cf. Burdick et al. 123). Furthermore, as Werner Sollores outlines in his contribution to this volume, new technologies and developments in the field of artificial intelligence allow for new, more “immersive” learning experiences.

At the same time, when Edward Snowden writes in Permanent Record that “[m]y generation did more than reengineer the world of intelligence; we entirely redefined what intelligence was” (1), he reminds us that the multifarious uses of new technologies present risks as much as they do promises. China’s digital social credit system, through which citizens have been subjected to (and often wholeheartedly embraced [cf. Yang 13]) unprecedented forms of surveillance as well as social, political, and economic control, is rapidly expanding and will soon force foreign businesses to feed their information into centralized databases (cf. Fannin). However, the erosion of the line separating corporate and government uses of big data, often translating directly into forms of economic and political power, is not a uniquely Chinese phenomenon, as the multilateral flows of operationalized personal data moving between Cambridge Analytica and Facebook in the British Leave.EU campaign and the 2016 American presidential election have made unmistakably clear. At a time when not only computer scientists and presidential election candidates but also some of the founders of social media platforms and tech companies are issuing warnings about digital technologies (cf. Lanier 2018; Hughes 2019; Brody and Schuetz 2019), and when enthusiasm for the conveniences of data mining, cloud computing, twitter campaigns, online search engines, and the sharing of personal images through digital networks has almost entirely displaced skepticism, digital technologies in educational contexts come with particular responsibilities and require critical perspectives on digitalization’s social, cultural, and political implications. Google, for instance, spends considerable amounts on the distribution through major German newspapers (as independent supplements, for instance, to Die ZEIT) of twenty- to forty-page ad magazines on topics such as “Aufbruch Datensicherung: Wie wir im Internet geschützt bleiben” to promote an image of communicative transparency, democratization, and trustworthiness, but its thirty-two-page privacy policy remains vague on essential aspects of the privacy issue, offering only elusive phrases such as “[w]e use the information we collect in existing services to help us develop new ones” (“Terms of Service”) without specifying what services are being developed and for what purposes. Google’s willingness to “share personal information outside of Google if we have a good-faith belief that access, use, preservation, or disclosure of the information is reasonably necessary” (“Terms of Service”) makes
it impossible for users to control their data, and the “good-faith belief” of one of the world’s largest technology companies might well diverge from that of the individuals whose personal information is in question. In a recent campaign, which drew significant public attention, company contractors collected biometric data from homeless African Americans in order to improve Google’s facial recognition software (cf. Nicas 2019). The people targeted were given $5 gift cards for Starbucks in exchange for 3D scans of their faces (Fussell 2019), but were not given information about how the data would be used. According to Sidney Fussell, the nature of the scans was not even made explicit: “[m]anagers reportedly encouraged contractors to mischaracterize the data collection as a ‘selfie game,’ akin to Snapchat filters such as Face Swap.” Once disclosed, this procedure received extensive media coverage and criticism, but the episode is suggestive of the possibility that a much larger number of activities of this kind continues to go unreported. “The only way,” Jaron Lanier reminds us, “to sell a loss of freedom, so that people will accept it voluntarily, is by making it look like a great bargain at first” (xxviii), by providing “free” services—or gift cards—in exchange for valuable, monetizable data.

Similarly, the “Terms of Service” for WhatsApp—the medium of choice for communication among teenagers in Europe, and, as of 2019, the “most popular instant messaging app worldwide” (Farid 2019)—explain that “you grant WhatsApp a worldwide, non-exclusive, royalty-free, sublicensable, and transferable license to use, reproduce, distribute, create derivative works of, display, and perform the information (including the content) that you upload, submit, store, send, or receive on or through our Services” (“WhatsApp Terms of Service”). WhatsApp is part of the Facebook Companies, and the agreement also specifies that all data will be shared with the larger corporation to “improve […] and market our Services and their offerings.” This phrasing is just as open to a broad range of interpretation as the Google policy for research and data collection discussed above. Because an increasing number of ever younger users rely on social media in a large segment of their daily activities, and because time is a resource rarely spent on the careful study of legal agreements, the protection—or even just an awareness of the value—of biometrical data, personal information, and privacy in general is rarely prioritized. What we therefore need first and foremost in educational contexts is, according to David Lyon, “ethical tools” and “a broadened sense of why privacy matters and ways of translating these into political goals” (123). The acceleration of technological innovation requires an increased sensitivity on the part of all users to the full consequences of new technologies and the services they make possible, a critical awareness of who benefits at which end, and an ability to opt in or out of specific features that might conflict with larger ethical concerns, political agendas, or even economic interests. This ability to make such decisions has largely been lost in the legal frameworks that govern consumer interac-
tions with the “Big Four” largest global tech companies. But in order for democracy to function and to enable full disclosure and responsibility, it is all the more important to tie debates about new technologies closely to educational contexts. Digital literacy (defined by Annabel Bils et al. as the ability to comprehend, contextualize, and communicate information in digital media) is worth developing, but this literacy must be complemented by data literacy, i.e., the ability to strategically use data and—no less importantly—to critically question and challenge the ways in which it is distributed and used (cf. Bils et al. 45).

In the interest of balancing this critical awareness with a spectrum of perspectives on new technologies, our first issue offers a multivocal set of key chords for these future trajectories. We have gathered contributions from diverse experts in a variety of fields and disciplines that work on and with the origins and effects of digitization and new technologies in academia and quotidian life. For this first, programmatic issue, we have also deliberately chosen to include a variety of formats of scholarly argument, including individual and multi-authored articles, a response, and an interview.

Werner Sollors and his twenty colleagues address the advantages as well as disadvantages of digitalization and new technologies for research and teaching from different institutional, gender, and ethnic backgrounds. They emphasize the availability of sources, which depends on locations and institutions, but they also see a strong reliance on digital tools as not only weakening the brain, and, thus, our capacity for critical thinking, but also as distracting from a deeper understanding of what research is all about. Larger problematic issues are the potential for state surveillance and commercial data-mining, which ultimately call for critical thinking by humans. While the unlimited accessibility of the world wide web was initially celebrated as a significant step in education, some schools and universities have created spaces blocked from internet and phone access in order to promote individual thinking and interpersonal discussion. Above all, what Sollors singles out is the speed with which devices, terms, and programs change and challenge our ability to adjust to ever new circumstances. For Sollors, virtual reality and artificial intelligence are further steps in this ongoing process.

In their response to Sollors and his collaborators’ analysis of the influence of digital media on teaching and research, Ingrid Gessner and Marc Priewe—both members of the Digital American Studies Initiative of the German Association for American Studies (GAAS / DGfA)—take this analysis to a specifically German American Studies context. For Gessner and Priewe, the central questions are those of access and the availability of digital material, the impact of these materials on the teaching environment, pedagogical methods, the need
for increased data literacy, and the opportunity for transdisciplinary research collaboration. They voice a number of challenges that this digitalization poses for a German academic context. They welcome the promise of access to new cultural material offered by archives and databases; however, they also see the limits of this promise in questions about who decides what is digitized and how and where this material is accessible. This restriction leads to the authors’ demand for free access to the internet everywhere. At the same time, they argue, joint disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary efforts are necessary to counter “fake news,” “alternative facts,” and “post-truth.” For Gessner and Priewe, the interdisciplinary nature of American Studies is essential for an understanding of these changes.

Both Carrie Johnston and Elizabeth LaPensée with Nicholas Emmons show how digitalization and digital computation can create racialized spaces, but they do so from different perspectives. LaPensée and her collaborators produced a computer game that revises American history as (also) Native American history and juxtaposes this alternative historical account to traditional non-Indigenous historical narratives; Carrie Johnston discusses an archive, hosted at the DeGolyer Library at Southern Methodist University, that contains promotional materials that advertise the Fred Harvey Company’s expanding Santa Fe Railway system, and articulate an underlying white belief in inevitable westward expansion that was equated with technological progress. Both LaPensée and Johnston unveil a settler-colonial mythology, most visibly manifested in the Harvey Company’s trackside museums, hotels, and restaurants. The Harvey Company, as Johnston shows, used Indigenous cultures to create an image of the Southwest as a “truly American” area in order to attract more railroad travelers. In contrast, Indigenous game-makers, as LaPensée maintains, resist this reductive incorporation of Indigenous history into white history, and instead focus on Indigenous knowledges. In line with Derrida’s famous claim that the archive “produces as much as it records the event” (17), the digitization of the Harvey Company’s archives reproduces the settler-colonial logic of American exceptionalism, whereas Indigenous video games replace this logic by claims for (political, cultural, and representational) sovereignty. In both cases, the authors thus show how technology can be used to preserve and create cultural heritage. Moreover, Johnston cautions against a simple transformation of print culture into digital archives because this process may imply the wide distribution of a “harmful logic” and suggests that American Studies as a discipline allows us to critique such narratives and practices and to create a “post-archival, flexible interface” “through which we can rethink current organizational structures […] to avoid replicating the damaging ideologies that created archives such as Harvey’s” in the first place. This post-archive could offer “metadata” and multiple other voices to critically discuss settler-colonial appropriations of Native American cultures.
Evelyn Korn addresses the increasing demand in the workforce for expertise in new technologies, a demand for which the STEM disciplines, i.e., science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, seem to prepare students. However, she also points out that the humanities, which emphasize critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, communication, and social and ethical reflection, are as important as technology and an adequate workforce. The classroom will clearly change because teachers and researchers will translate their own use of new technologies into their teaching practices, including the processing of data and the mediating of new and critical skills. Korn argues that, in spite of labor-market needs, universities should not become institutions that simply produce and prepare students for specific jobs, but should also foster a critical and reflective stance. Consequently, she argues, higher education has to become multi- and interdisciplinary and competency-oriented. Market orientation is relevant, but a slower-paced adoption of this orientation (in comparison with the U.S.-American model) would allow for a consideration of the social consequences of omnipresent digitalization and let the 4 Cs—critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity—come to full fruition, ideally, for all members of society.

Finally, the interview conducted with Jeffrey Schnapp, the founder of “metaLab” at Harvard University’s Berkman Klein Center, reveals both interdisciplinarity and disciplinarity at the heart of an experimental undertaking, and also emphasizes the fact that design questions are always research- and method-oriented and include a strong component of supportive technology. The lab’s contribution to the Harvard Art Museums, the Lightbox Gallery, is database-driven and offers visual experiences of art works from multiple perspectives. The lab also developed “Curricule,” a new course selection and management platform that offers dynamic, data-driven tools for navigating course offerings. Based on these examples, Schnapp discusses one of the most central questions of this first open-access issue of Amerikastudien / American Studies, namely the influence digitalization and, generally, technology have on teaching and pedagogy in the classroom. He emphasizes the possibility of designing so-called “zooming experiences” that allow students and teachers to keep moving in networks and zooming in and out of smaller and larger contexts. Yet, as a medievalist, he does not celebrate technology for technology’s sake, but instead points out its usefulness in and outside of the classroom. Like any other cultural object, Schnapp sees technological products as results of particular cultural fabrics of entanglement, among them social networks that have their own dynamics and language and that are, he suggests, expressions of democratization. Open-access publications, for Schnapp, are one path toward such a democratization of education. Other forms of technology, such as AI, must also be used responsibly, which implies teaching students how to understand the powers and limits of technologies, and
the ways in which it is possible to make use of them critically, creatively, appropriately, and ethically.

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We envision this first issue as a forum for exchange on the intersections between new technologies, on the one hand, and education, on the other, from American Studies perspectives and with an emphasis on data literacy. Computational devices have, for several decades, been changing the possibilities and practices of teaching and research, and their effects on knowledge production, educational cultures, and social environments deserve broader attention in an age when technology develops faster than political and legal frameworks. From the use of digital archives and reference materials, to blended-learning technologies, online exhibitions, virtual classrooms, and web-based mapping and research methodologies, we hope to showcase a number of exemplary ways in which new technologies have affected and continue to shape not only the field of American Studies, but also education and academia at large.

We understand the transformation of Amerikastudien / American Studies into an open-access platform as a contribution to these changes, one that promotes free, international access and the development of both digital and data literacies. Open-access publication is, of course, never “free,” even if it is offered to its readers without monetary charge. We gratefully acknowledge the dedication and contributions of the new editorial board and the hard work and unfailing commitment of our new associate editors: Cedric Essi, Johanna Heil, Kathleen Loock, and Connor Pitetti. We are equally indebted to the editorial offices’ team members at Europa-Universität Flensburg and at Philipps-Universität Marburg: Kristina Baudemann, Andrew Erickson, Sibylle Machat, Rebekka Rohleder, and Bethany Jordan Webster-Parmentier. Without their invaluable support, we would not have been able to present this issue within the given time frame. Thanks are due to our distinguished contributors for making this project a success, and we are especially grateful to our publisher, Universitätsverlag Winter, for their long-term partnership and unceasing support. From the voluntary services provided by highly qualified peer reviewers, copy-editors, and proofreaders to the professional services of preparing the final layout, indexing, and distribution, a high-quality open-access journal requires a substantial investment of resources. In a period when democracy is increasingly threatened by big data, and when debate and argumentative dialogue have been insidiously displaced by filter bubbles, echo chambers, and normative claims to perceived truths, this investment may not be entirely misplaced.
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