

Open-source cyborgs and DIY data: Chances and challenges for a democratisation of gender

Zusammenfassung

Open-Source-Cyborgs und DIY-Daten: Chancen und Herausforderungen für Geschlechterdemokratisierung

Der Beitrag beleuchtet die aktuelle „politische Ontologie“ der Mensch-Ding-Beziehung aus der Perspektive der Debatte „what we design designs us back“. Anhand verschiedener Phänomene wird gezeigt, wie das aktuelle technologische Design Objekte-als-Subjekte und Subjekte-als-Objekte produziert, wobei insbesondere die implizite Herstellung von Geschlechterdualismen in diesem Prozess analysiert wird. Es wird zudem gefragt, ob und, wenn ja, wie DIY-Disruption alltäglicher technologischer Systeme diese aktive Produktion impliziten Genderings unterbrechen kann. Designexperimente u. a. aus der „hacking culture“ werden als Beispiele für technisch intelligible soziale Störungen von Alltagssystemen herangezogen, anhand derer die Möglichkeiten diskutiert werden, „die Apparate zu verwirren“. Dabei wird die These vertreten, dass das Teilen und Analysieren von Daten nicht als objektiver und automatisierter Vorgang aufgefasst werden sollte, sondern als subjektive und manipulierbare Tätigkeit. Abschließend wird das Potenzial unserer Entwicklung hin zu „Open-Source-Cyborgs“ ausgelotet – und damit unser aktiver Anteil an der Ausgestaltung unseres eigenen Körpers und Geistes, nämlich durch die Ermöglichung eines stetig neu strukturierten und neu interpretierten materiell-sozialen DIY-Prozesses.

Schlüsselwörter

Politische Ontologie, „Becoming-with-Things“, Hacking-Kultur, sozio-materielle Interventionen, Open Source, Gender, DIY-Materialien

Summary

This article draws a picture of the ontological politics that is currently at play in the relationship between people and things from the perspective of “what we design designs us back”. Drawing on an array of phenomena, we illustrate how the current discourse on the design of technologies produces objects-as-subjects and subjects-as-objects, and we explore the implicit production of gendered dualisms within this process. The article goes on to discuss whether and how the DIY disruption of mundane technological systems can interrupt this active production of tacit gendering. Illustrated by design experiments involving “hacking culture” as technically intelligible social disruptions of everyday systems, the article then discusses the option of “confusing the apparatus”. It is argued that the sharing and analysis of data should not be seen as something objective and automated, but rather as something subjective and manipulable. Finally, we argue the potential of our evolution into open-source cyborgs – and hence, the prospective of taking an active part in the designing of one’s own body and mind through a constant DIY reshuffling and reinterpretation of the material-social.

Keywords

ontological politics, becoming-with-things, hacking culture, socio-material interventions, open-source gender, DIY data

1 Ontological politics

In a world in which we have managed to design everything – from life (“designing babies” using pre-implantation genetic diagnosis) to death (from last will apps to Google’s Immortality Project), we can hardly tell the “subject” from the “object” or what is “organic” from what is an “artifice”. We have (b)reached an entirely new level and scale of intimacy – from ubiquitous computing to medicinal extensions and nano-technology. Designed artefacts and systems extend our memory, abilities and fathomable existences, as we extend theirs. From blogs and feeds, to smartphones and smart homes, to purchased and DIY body augmentation, technology has become deeply a part of us both mentally and physically. And so we have also become accomplices in designing gender – corporeally and cognitively, materially and imagined, in visions and in everyday life.

These are times in which Apple’s (originally female) intelligent personal assistant Siri re-establishes the deep-seated notion of the female aide, while Kim Kardashian’s bottom as an emoji apparently crashed the Apple App Store due to an overwhelmingly high number of downloads.¹ Meanwhile, pro-anorexia hashtags such as #thinspo (“Thinspiration”) had to be banned on several online social forums as they were resulting in the rapid prototyping of sick bodies.² This is an era of smart objects in which we design the measurement of everything, from our intake of calories to our menstrual cycle, as a kick-starter project attempts to fund the world’s first smart menstrual cup using the slogan “Measure, Analyze, and Track. Help us redefine menstruation”.³ Consequently, these are times in which we are witnessing the production of gender manifested not just in language and behaviour but in principles of products and paradigms of programming.

Within this sphere of hyper-connectivity, we are not just consuming and downloading, but also producing and uploading data (intentionally or unintentionally) every day and all the time. Surrounded by smart technologies and connected devices, we are continually being read, categorised and targeted, tagged and traced. Be it through the gendered advertising of a news feed, the culturally engineered results from a search engine or the assumptions behind the suggested settings in a smart home: These technologies are not just produced as gender biased, they are actively producing us as such, through every algorithm. In these times of fake news and malicious bots, we sometimes lose track of who or what is speaking and begin to hesitate when trying to draw the boundaries of where we stop and where the technology begins. As “intelligent” artefacts and pattern recognition algorithms learn our behaviour and produce us based on who we are (or how we act), we are potentially taking a step backwards as we give up our agency not just to devices but to our own bad habits. And so, through use, gendered prepositions are designed into everyday interactions and things – as they are deeply entrenched, from the grammar of language to the grammar of code. Therefore, as we gender objects and

1 www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/dec/23/kim-kardashian-emoji-app-kimoji-apple (date of access: 15 February 2017).

2 www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/arts-post/post/instagram-bans-thinspiration-pro-eating-disorder-images/2012/04/24/gIQAAXLeaT_blog.html?utm_term=.dccc4f209e9 (date of access: 15 February 2017).

3 www.kickstarter.com/projects/700989404/looncup-the-worlds-first-smart-menstrual-cup (date of access: 25 January 2017).