Call for Papers:

CfP: *Assistance, Assistants and Assistive Media. Barriers and Interfaces of digital cultures* (Einreichungen bis 18. April 2021)

As technological assistants and automated systems are becoming more and more ubiquitous, human-machine interactions are mediated through a growing number and variety of interfaces. This call invites scholars from media studies, disability studies, sociology as well as historians of science and technology and fields related to these areas to discuss the notion of *assistance* in relation to media at a two-day conference.

In cars, for example, a range of »advanced driver-assistance systems« (ADAS) support the operator in changing the lane, parking the vehicle or monitoring dead angles. The auto-correction function featured in most word processors and messengers, too, may be viewed as a technological assistant or automated support. Yet, the term »assistive technology« usually only denotes (high and low tech) devices devised for people with sensory, cognitive or motor disabilities. While ADAS tend to convey notions of comfort and convenience, assistive technologies often carry stigma, especially when »drawing attention to an otherwise invisible disability« (Mills, 2012, p. 327). However, the terminology of technological engineering poses an exception: here an »assistive system« (Assistenzsystem) is *any* computer based device or programme that supports *any* user in successfully completing a specific task. In engineering, »assistive systems« are designed to »compensate for human weaknesses« (Gerke 2014, p. 10) that only occur in the process of engaging with a technological system in the first place. Consequently, from an engineering point of view, the need for assistance is relational as well as temporary, since it only emerges from a specific (media) environment. This view resonates with statements from scholars within disability studies such as Katherine Ott: »Since all useful technology is assistive, it is peculiar that we stipulate that some devices are assistive while others need no qualification« (Ott, 2002, 21). Nevertheless, resorting to »human weakness« as a reference point – may it be temporary or not – for conceptualising assistance entails another set of fallacies and has therefore rightfully been criticised by scholars within disability studies and cultural studies, for example Karin Harrasser (2018). What is more, the expertise of users, drivers, caretakers etc. plays an essential role when technological assistants and assistive technologies are used/deployed as »support mechanisms«. These practices entangled with assistive systems require consideration and critical analysis, too (Mauldin 2020).

Taking the engineering perspective as a point of departure, we would like to invite contributions that investigate software, hardware, interfaces and devices as *mediators of barriers*. We want to propose that technological assistants in general and assistive technologies in particular can be described as *assistive media* –- media that intervene in an already existing media environment and add an additional level of translation to the human-machine interaction. As the historical study of technological assistants reveals, in some cases technologies implemented to overcome one barrier eventually created new ones. Each user interface offers new modes of interaction while declining others: the touchscreen merged input and output devices into one plain surface and thereby allowed for a bigger screen – yet, without haptic feedback, a screen reader and voice control, it renders mobile phones almost inoperable for users who rely primarily on their sense of touch. Therefore, we are suggesting

to discuss both »assistance« and »access« in relation to (temporal) barriers by focusing on media's oscillation between posing a problem and offering a solution.

The following aspects and questions indicate topics we would like to cover:

- histories of computer-based soft- and hardware assistants
- explorations into non-anthropocentric perspectives on assistive media (e.g. computer-computer interfaces and developer's perspective)
- discuss assistants as technologies that entail enabling and disabling effects at the same time
- If all technologies *assist*, how do we define »assistive media«?
- interdependencies of assistive technologies and care as practice within socio-technical systems.
- developing for and with dis/abilities: how do concepts like Crip Technoscience (Hamraie and Fritsch, 2019) change the notion of assistance?
- integrating disability studies and media studies
- media histories of disability as a concept

Contributions from both theory and practice are welcome. We are hoping for contributions that represent a wide range of perspectives including the importance of the voices of disabled people.

Abstracts of max. 1500 characters (including spaces) for 30-minute lectures can be submitted via the following address assistivemedia@leuphana.de until 18th April 2021. Please attach a short CV (one page) and send all documents in one PDF. If your contribution is accepted, we will need a short biography and, if available, topic related bibliographical information. You will receive notification regarding the acceptance of your contribution by early May.

The conference will take place from **1st to 3rd July 2021** and will most likely be held online (e.g. Zoom). If the COVID pandemic allows, interested participants are invited to join us for a hybrid format on campus at Leuphana University Lüneburg. In the – unfortunately rather unlikely – event that we all will be able to meet face-to-face in Lüneburg, we attempt to cover travel and accommodation expenses for speakers. CART and ASL are provided either way. For other accommodations, please indicate in your application/registration.

Following the conference, the publication of an anthology is planned. Invited speakers will be kindly asked to submit a first draft of their conference contribution (max. 15.000 characters incl. spaces) by September 30th

Confirmed Keynote Speaker: Mara Mills (New York University)

Organizers: Wolfgang Hagen, Jan Müggenburg, Philipp Sander and Anna-Lena Wiechern

For further Information please contact: assistivemedia@leuphana.de

References :

Gerke, Wolfgang (2014): Technische Assistenzsysteme. Vom Industrieroboter zum Roboterassistenten. Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenburg.

Hamraie, Aime and Kelly Fritsch (2019): »Crip technoscience manifesto. Catalyst: Feminism, Theory«, in: Technoscience, 5(1), 1-34.

Harrasser, Karin (2018): Schwächeln. Technikphilosophie, Techniksubjektivität, Unvermögen. In: Schick, Johannes/ Schmidt, Mario/van Loyen, Ulrich/Zillinger, Martin (Eds.): Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften 2: Homo faber. Bielefeld: transcript, S. 149-159.

Mauldin, Laura (2020): »Support Mechanism. Technology can't provide care, only redistribute who gives it and how«, in: Real Life Mag, Oct. 22nd 2020, https://reallifemag.com/support-mechanism/ (last accessed: 20.02.2021).

Mills, Mara (2012): »Do Signals have Politics? Inscribing Abilities in Cochlear Implants«, in: Pinch, T. / Bijsterveld, K. (Eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies, Oxford: Oxford University Press, S.320-346. S. 327

Ott, Katherine; Serlin, David; Mihm, Stephen (2002): Artificial Parts, Practical Lives: Modern Histories of Prosthetics. New York: New York University Press.