'DEMOCRATIC' KNOWLEDGE:

AN OASIS OR A MIRAGE?

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The way we relate to information nowadays has definitely changed the way we perceive knowledge. For instance, the internet came to revolutionise the circumstances in which we approach knowledge and form beliefs as more people than ever before have been drawn into the whirlwind of information. (Un)fortunately, not all of this information appears to be reliable. In a positive sense, this indicates that laymen are taking an active role in the exchange of ideas. On the other hand, serious flaws in the quality of information can result in confusion at best.

The great variety of information and its quality, however, is not as unfortunate as we may think. One can certainly assume that with the explosion of information technology social moral frameworks have never before been put to the test as much by its adherents and outsiders. This challenge to what we believe and take for granted morally might be a necessary evil in order to gain more than we could lose in terms of social cohesion as we experiment with new technologies.

This phenomenon, in my opinion, has not yet been thoroughly addressed by anthropologists, and its potential as an analytic tool has been overlooked. I think the main reason for this is the fact that it is full of subtleties concealed by more visible social changes brought about by technology. Having said this, I believe social anthropological studies could benefit from acknowledging the value of this tangle of unreliable information. Although significance and value are very similar concepts, in this essay, they are not treated as the same thing; yet, as will become apparent, they are essential to each other. I understand significance as socially meaningful and transforming, and value as insightful and worth analysing. Hence, I would like to explore these two concepts in order to shed light on the effects of digital information on social moral frameworks and its usefulness as an analytic tool.

First we need to differentiate between critical knowledge and what I would term 'democratic knowledge'. The former originates when we are engaged, individually or socially, in serious and warranted thinking (e.g. professional or academic knowledge), while the latter refers to the type of knowledge engendered by the combination of reliable and unreliable information. 'Democratic knowledge' is generated by the public itself. It tends to be very fluid in terms of personal beliefs and emotions, and is (re)created through the constant sharing of information. Virtually anyone who wishes to share information can contribute to 'democratic knowledge'[1], which can be accessed effortlessly through the internet.

One can find instances of this democratic knowledge in websites like 'La Mia Cura – My Open Source Cure'.

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[1] I use 'democratic knowledge' in this sense throughout the paper, but without the quotation marks thereafter for ease of reading.

The latter is an open source website where everyone, irrespective of their cultural and educational background, can offer a cure to the creator of the website who was diagnosed with a cancerous brain tumour (Iaconesi 2012). The objective is for the website to become a source of knowledge comprised of everyone's ideas to treat brain cancer, and which in turn can be consulted by anyone who is interested and/or has the disease.

Another case which helps us visualise the potential of focusing on democratic knowledge is an ethnographic study of the internet in Trinidad and Tobago by Daniel Miller and Don Slater. In this ethnography, vertical – hierarchical – organizational models followed by 'Apostolic' religious institutions in Trinidad and Tobago have been consistently challenged by the 'horizontal' nature of opinion forums online (Miller and Slater 2000). In other words, the internet provides an arena where Christian believers voice their opinions even if they do not possess any relevant authority within the organized religion: '… the interconnectedness and flow of information afforded by the internet gave new powers and autonomy to individuals, which had then to be understood within and disciplined by their institutions' (Miller and Slater 2000: 18). According to Miller and Slater, online forums have democratised the discussions and hermeneutics of Christians in Trinidad and Tobago which were once under the sole control of elders and religious leaders.

In my personal experience, during Mexico's presidential election campaign in 2012 where thousands – if not millions – of posts flowed freely on Facebook in support of or against candidates, people were openly denouncing the vested interests of mainstream media. What I could gather from the many posts which inundated my Facebook page was the feeling of complete disbelief in any source of information not coming from the internet. The internet was held to be more reliable and objective. What struck me was the power of this 'messy' information synthesised as knowledge and shared around the web. On the contrary, for a student of Social Anthropology such as myself, this did not seem like a good indication of what was going on politically in Mexico since I was convinced that rumours were an unreliable measure of everyday activity.

I was sceptical of analytical approaches which dwell on rumour-type phenomena as discussed by the anthropologist Veena Das (1998). This concern can also be raised for the Trinidad and Tobago case, since the average believer does not possess the specialised knowledge of a religious leader. The effect that the forums had over institutions could be only superficial since the flow of relevant and irrelevant information from all directions might have hampered any palpable change. This could also apply to 'La Mia Cura – My Open Source Cure' and similar contemporary projects; we need to wait and see how these phenomena unravel.

Das thinks that, if used in research, the rumour-panic phenomenon only offers a half-complete picture of what is

relevant. As it is basically a proliferation of ideas which do not entail critical thinking from the individuals to whom the information is passed on, it behaves more like an inevitable contagion rather than a 'well-absorbed' medicine. In other words, it has a 'contagion-effect' (Das 1998). She implies that information which has rumour-panic characteristics lacks value, as it tends to be superficial: 'There seems a transformation from social exchange to communal trance' (Das 1998: 187). Henceforth, one can conclude that the value of democratic knowledge as a research tool is hampered by this effect.

However, Das is only concerned with the phenomenon of rumour-panic itself and not with the means used to spread that rumour. The very nature of the internet prevents this from happening, since there are more parties participating in the sharing of ideas. Moreover, the mix of information comprising democratic knowledge also comes from websites which provide critical knowledge. There are news pieces and articles that can be read for free online from renowned magazines and newspapers like the Economist, freely accessible talks from experts on Ted.com, open access journals like HAU[2], and posts on critical thinkers' personal blogs.

Within anthropology itself, there is in fact a new phenomenon introduced by cultural anthropologist Michael Wesch – 'digital ethnography' – which 'explore[s] mediated culture, seeking to merge the ideas of Media Ecology[3] and Cultural Anthropology' (Wesch 2012a, 2012b). Besides the project analysing the democratisation of ideas through YouTube, it definitely is in itself educational, counting as critical knowledge. I embrace the view of Daniel Miller (2012) that 'the digital might make anthropology exciting, but more than that, significant' (Miller 2012: 390) – not just for the field of anthropology but more generally, providing a voice to everyone that can have access to free – unconstrained – internet.

From all this I would say that democratic knowledge is actually insightful and hence valuable. It has somehow been indirectly analysed by anthropologists, but if we are to reap the benefits of this approach, it seems in real need of being addressed directly.

Yet, does this type of knowledge possess any significance for society? Is it an oasis of change or simply a confusing and irrelevant mirage? Since misleading information created and nurtured by the public is no better than deception contrived by the mass media and political leaders, one is right to question its significance beyond its mere value as an analytical tool and its significance as a contemporary global occurrence. Does it have a meaningful edge over mainstream disseminated knowledge, does it have any real power, or is it only a fad?

In everyday life, one can assume that judging one's ordinary actions is merely a routine which does not involve critical thinking but only matching those actions to one's moral framework: 'Practice is merely socialized routine'

(Miller 2010: 419). However, when our ideas are confronted on a grand scale with other people's view of the world through digital media, I believe that 'words…do, act, produce and achieve' (Malinowski 1935: 52). Democratic knowledge engendered on the internet represents democracy and the possibility for faster social change, since it allows for greater human participation and exchange of information. One can think of social change as the transformation or mutation of the social moral structure. Zigon (2007) and Robins (2007) showed that moral values can be challenged, modified, and rejected in what Zigon called 'moral breakdowns'.

In line with Michael Lambek's (2008) theoretical framework[4], I argued in my dissertation (2012) that ethical values embody the freedom to exercise one's will to choose the best moral values amongst those available. In other words, ethics is equivalent to freedom of expressing your choice of moral values. It must be noted that freedom and choice is essentially different for different cultures and societies at any given time. Therefore it is not only helpful but fair to acknowledge the fact that to a greater or lesser extent, in any society, there are options and thus decisions to make in the many areas of life, in this case, in the moral arena.

I think this framework is helpful when assessing the significance of democratic knowledge, since the moral structure of a given culture/society is constantly put to the test by the overwhelming amount of relevant and irrelevant information found on the internet. One can think of a society experiencing changes in the way they see their culture and other cultures based on ideas coming from people living different realities (and in different places), sharing similar situations, or simply because knowledge previously held in specialised literature has become publicly available.

Therefore we can conceive, in a Bakhtinian sense, of social forces which challenge a cultural framework and move 'outwards' (centrifugally), as well as forces which attempt to bind the framework together (centripetally). Centrifugal forces are especially at play online since the internet represents the 21st-century's democratic tool par excellence: 'Centripetal forces reassert ideologies and moral frameworks and promote social cohesion whereas centrifugal forces challenge the establishment and strive for change and individuality' (Acero Araluce 2012: 12). This is not to say that there are not centripetal forces online, such as governmental, religious, and mass media

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[2] HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory is an international peer-reviewed open access journal that focuses on the central role of ethnography for anthropological theorizing.

[3] Media Ecology is the theory which claims that technology not only influences our lives but also has a direct impact on our concept of things.

[4] In my MSc dissertation (2012) I substituted his version of economic values for my version of moral values.

broadcasters, as well as newspapers websites. But the internet possesses a broader scope that other sources of information lack; that is, it is democratic in terms of 'ordinary' people's participation.

Thus even if we consider democratic knowledge to be deficient, it may be useful to conceive of it as providing more benefits than disadvantages. I believe its significance resides particularly on the questioning and reshaping power of moral frameworks that it informs. This in turn can have a direct or indirect impact on cultural, political, and religious frameworks: '[V]irtuality provides a kind of social laboratory or even liberation in which the performative character of all social realities and identities can be brought to light, deconstructed and transcended' (Miller and Slater 2000: 5).

Two phenomena appear to be at play whenever we contribute to or are influenced by democratic knowledge: 1) acting ethically, that is, freely but with personal responsibility for choosing the best moral values available; and 2) questioning the validity of the pool of moral values when they do not seem to be beneficial for the public as a whole or for our personal lives. These, without a doubt, are the priceless corollary of starting the flow of democratic knowledge: 'We can transform the role of knowledge, we can be human' (Iaconesi 2012).

The accelerated sharing of information perpetuated by the internet has definitely had an impact on our social environment. The value of analysing data which has the potential to provide us with more in-depth information beyond its numbing 'contagion-effect' – such as democratic knowledge – is certainly worth delving into. I believe that there is more to it than only a messy display of pseudo-knowledge and general information which may say more about certain groups or individuals than about the population as a whole, or perhaps more about the subtleties of a culture's moral systems than about group or individual ideologies. It is necessary to keep an eye on the nuances of this information and be more creative in the way we approach them, as we might be overlooking what could conceivably be of great value to social anthropology and other social sciences.

Exploring the effects of the digital on cultural moral frameworks in light of the value and significance of what I called 'democratic knowledge' is, I believe, one of the many possible ways one can address how cultures are dealing with new information technologies. More than that, I think the effect that this type of knowledge is having on moral values is more beneficial than detrimental since people take more action over their ethics – selecting the most appropriate moral values available culturally – and do not relegate this obligation to others. In other words, the direct – and not mediated – participation of laymen online has become more active and as a consequence has provided the opportunity for personal expression and choice (though this may be constrained by their societal norms), and the chance to debate and exchange

their ideas with others such as in the instances mentioned above. This in turn has the possibility of engendering a more just society where everyone with online access and IT competency has the chance to think actively, engage in the exchange of ideas, voice their concerns, and also be accountable for their actions and thinking.

While the effects of accessing knowledge online have already been felt across the globe, there is without doubt much more to come. It depends on us how we make use of future technologies, and must inevitably entail a careful assessment of the knowledge made available through them. ◈

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