

Ulrich Johannes SCHNEIDER

Counter-Knowledge

An Update on Foucault in the Age of Mobile Communication

French philosopher Michel Foucault outlined the concept of 'counter-knowledge' in 1966, when he was interested in structures of knowledge outside of the history of ideas. In view of Foucault's later works, the notion of counter-knowledge also embraces moral values of non-conformity, ethical standards of turning one's life into a work of art. In combining both approaches we can ask if there is such a thing as individually produced knowledge which is knowledge in the full sense, not just private information. New technology makes this question more interesting with regard to the internet and the use of mobile phones.

Using the internet, Wikipedia and Wikisource seem to produce knowledge which is standardized yet includes elements of counter-knowledge, in the sense of under-privileged knowledge outside the canon of received truth. For any process of rewriting and restructuring knowledge from the fringes of established sources, the free communication of ideas and information on the internet is essential. Wikipedia and Wikisource represent modern forms of the medieval scriptorium, a virtual monastery in a world where knowledge building and destroying is happening at a very fast rate.

Furthermore, there is also wild knowledge, based on information gathered by mobile authors using mobile communication devices. Marginal and accidental knowledge is produced and distributed by phones and forms of social networking as text, image, film. There is a world already in existence with personalized topographies and histories, including witness accounts which are not in any usual way filtered or checked (execution of Saddam Hussein, London bombings).

If we want to speak of counter-knowledge to design the built-in censoring mechanisms of our culture, is the internet the place where it can exist? Are mobile communication devices the instruments which help it emerge? Foucault became famous for saying that any discourse is controlled and controls at the same time. Should there be an ethics for dealing with counter-knowledge, protecting the rights of authors and persons being targeted?

Ulrich Johannes SCHNEIDER is Director of the Universitätsbibliothek Leipzig, and Professor of Philosophie at the Institut für Kulturwissenschaften of the University of Leipzig. Some main publications: *Philosophie und Universität: Historisierung der Vernunft im 19. Jahrhundert*, Hamburg: 1999; *Michel Foucault*, Darmstadt: 2004; *Kultur der Kommunikation: Die europäische Gelehrtenrepublik im Zeitalter von Leibniz bis Lessing*, Wiesbaden: 2005 (editor); *Seine Welt wissen: Enzyklopädien in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Darmstadt: 2006 (editor); "Die Konstruktion des allgemeinen Wissens: Eine phänotypische Beschreibung enzyklopädischer Literatur", in U. J. Schneider (ed.), *Kulturen des Wissens im 18. Jahrhundert*, to appear in 2008.

E-mail: schneider@ub.uni-leipzig.de.

