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An Update on Foucault
in the Age of Mobile Communication

In our time, it has become easy to contribute to the general pool of knowledge: Tell somebody about events that have just happened and think yourself useful, publish a video of a crime and make history, put up a rumour and ruin someone's career. My question is: Can we talk about counter-knowledge when it comes to news-contributors who are not journalists but have mobile phones from which they can send messages and photos?

I will first outline why the idea of counter-knowledge is attractive, then sketch it as defined by French philosopher Michel Foucault. My third point is about ways of writing which produce counter-knowledge, before finally asking if sending an image can have the same effect.

Counter-Knowledge

Modern European philosophers have almost always followed scientific advice when it comes to the definition of knowledge. Philosophically speaking, knowledge in a reliable sense has been produced by science alone. Even in the humanities, scholarly discipline leads to the establishment of well-argued and permanent results, and there are philological, historical, and aesthetic criteria which produce vocabularies in which knowledge is secured. What interests philosophers most when they deal with knowledge is its validity, rather than its mode of production, whether scientific or humanistic. For philosophers, knowledge is distinguished from opinions or hypotheses by virtue of its general validity or objectivity. We know that the earth turns around the sun, and not the other way round, and we know that the Second World War was started by the German Reich, and not by any other nation. Knowledge in its most purist definition is made up of undoubted facts.

What most of us believe is made up of knowledge in this sense: There are many things we know for a fact. Beyond this, we believe many other things which cannot be established as facts, although some may call them

true. Some believe that the reports of September 11, 2001, were fabricated. Some believe that Neil Armstrong never set foot on the moon. In the south-west of France, I met people who firmly believed they have had contact with aliens. In the Middle Ages, other people in the same region believed Jesus had lived his married life there with Margret and had many children. These beliefs are not limited to common folk or what we may call ordinary people. In the seventeenth century, the learned Jesuit Hardouin claimed that most of Greek classical literature was invented in his own time and should not be taken as historical fact. European history is as full of sceptics and non-believers as it is full of forgers and false witnesses.

French philosopher Michel Foucault dealt extensively with the establishment of scientific knowledge and other claims to truth and objective validity. What makes his work remarkable is the way he analyzes knowledge, which for him is exclusively embedded in discourse. Foucault sees knowledge not as series of propositions related to facts "out there" in reality. And he does not support the idea of a belief system which can be approached as a separate entity. Facts and beliefs are both held together, in Foucault's philosophy, by a discourse which asserts them, or more precisely: which establishes them, produces them, makes them happen, appear, emerge. Knowledge is a discursive reality, or, in Foucault's words: a positivity. He also named it an archive of things said, understood, and acted on.

In the massive corpus of books, articles, and lectures Foucault left us, he did not reflect upon other media than text and speech, both folded into his notion of discourse. He was utterly traditional in his approach to art and did not use video or audio as a means of articulation. He died in 1984 and never knew about the computer, let alone the internet. However, Foucault's philosophy offers a unique vantage point when it comes to media and especially to mobile communication. Reading Foucault, we can ask whether information provided by mobile phones or other personal devices may qualify as "counter-knowledge" – a term which Foucault developed in his theoretical as well as in his political philosophy.

Knowledge and Discourse

Foucault was not only interested in conflicts of knowledge and struggles of power, he actively contributed to them. What he called "archeology" was a method of analyzing the history of reason or of the human sciences, and at the same time it was meant as an instrument to destroy the traditional methods used by the history of sciences and by the history of ideas. In his books *Madness and Civilization* and *The Order of Things*, he attacked the received expectation of progress when going back in time,

and he unsettled the notion of an omnipotent "man" much like Nietzsche did almost one hundred years earlier. Foucault especially linked the production of discourse to the effects of censorship and violence invested in the very nature of the discourse.

Foucault saw discourses as not being exempt from power relations and he also thought about procedures to counter them. In his famous inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1971, *The Order of Discourse*, Foucault first talked about the role of society in shaping discourses, including those which aim at the truth and nothing but the truth. For Foucault, there is no "will to knowledge" untainted by power, and so power can be used to alter discourses. With Foucault, we learn that there always is an alternative to whatever is valid, true, or simply dominant. But any subversion of the *status quo* has to challenge knowledge in its established way. Just calling it false will not help. When the production of knowledge is a complex procedure involving agencies both intellectual and political, then counter-knowledge must be a complex alternative, not just simply different.

Before Foucault spoke of "counter-knowledge" in one of his lectures in January 1976, he had already ventured the idea of "counter-disciplines" or "counter-sciences" in his "archeology of the human sciences" ten years earlier. In this book, he meant to replace knowledge production in the human sciences through methods provided by ethnology, linguistics, and psychoanalysis. These were, at that moment, "counter-sciences" by means of which Foucault wanted to get rid of anthropological concepts. He was then in favour of a more structural analysis.

Later on, Foucault developed a political philosophy which understood power as something enacted, not established. In the 1970s, Foucault became the hero of anarchist activists who used a whole range of methods to destabilize established power by organizing events which in turn empowered them. Power was everywhere, and acting against it was in itself acting it out. However, as critics like Jürgen Habermas made clear, there is no way Foucault could justify any regime of justice, or even justice itself. Foucault very explicitly said to Noam Chomsky that social struggle and combat was really not about any idea of a just society, but about power alone. In his political philosophy as in his earlier epistemological analysis, Foucault was rather destructive and not fond of any sort of government.

It was – and is – precisely the Foucauldian idea that countering established truths and forms of government is possible which seems attractive to people using the internet and devices for mobile communication to get their version of reality communicated. In times when structures of dis-

course and of power cannot be overcome directly by confronting them, they may be attacked indirectly or subversively by making them unstable. Now, when it comes to knowledge produced by the great many people who operate little machines sending texts and images – can we work with Foucault here? I personally think some of Foucault's ideas can indeed be helpful in thinking through the problems associated with the world of individually multiplied and diversified knowledge.

Writing and Rewriting

A quick comparison might help. We all know Wikipedia, an encyclopedia written by a community of interested and more or less able people in several languages around the globe. There are many aspects to the phenomenon of Wikipedia, and I will ignore most of them here. But for comparison's sake, let us agree that Wikipedia is produced as an alternative to conventionally distributed knowledge. In Germany, major publishing houses are revising their production of multi-volume printed encyclopedias because their readers have switched to Wikipedia already.

Writing an article in Wikipedia may not be an act of criticism, nor does it involve a revolutionary mind. Many authors enjoy producing very specialized knowledge, some just want to write something, a few succeed and deliver compelling texts. However, I would consider this counter-knowledge, not so much because it contradicts received knowledge, but because it depends on a consensus of a community whose members have the right to change anything at any moment. Counter-knowledge is validated differently from established knowledge, in that it is vetted by those who want to learn, and not by those who professionally know.

There is even a better example for this, Wikisource. Here texts are reproduced on the internet by modern scribes who take an interest in literature, poetry, history, and many other written and printed sources. Wikisource is all about making texts accessible on the internet, produced by passion and interest alone. The authors are like monks in a scriptorium, yet without a sacred text and without theological authority. What they produce is a reproduction out of devotion, much like manuscript reproduction in the Arab cultural context. What authors of Wikisource write is what they read, an acquisition of texts and thoughts and ideas already possessed, but not sufficiently circulated.

Traditions of national literature are being rebuilt by activists of Wikisource and other minds doing for free what professors are paid for and publishers profit from: a library composed solely of books valued for their content. Wikipedia and Wikisource are two forms of activity producing

a vast amount of texts made relevant through the very process of writing or rewriting. They constitute a discourse which runs at a distance to the official, established discourse, sometimes overlapping with it, sometimes contradicting it, sometimes forgetting about it altogether (never underestimate the playfulness in working online).

The Power of Images

Producing and sending images is different from writing texts because an image gives information but it does not connect the information to a discourse. At first glance, images can change our knowledge more radically than texts. Images function as fact, as material proof for events or aspects thereof. Whether images are officially sanctioned or subversively opposed to official knowledge, they reinforce the credibility of historical accounts. The fact that U.S. president Kennedy was shot, as well as his alleged killer, Oswald, we know through images more than through witness accounts. The first man on the moon, the first East German citizen climbing over the Berlin wall, and tons of more trivial facts are burned in our memory through images. Images are immensely more powerful than words in making us believe.

However, images can be manipulated and fabricated. We learn from movies that surveillance cameras can be short-circuited to *not* show what is going on. Sam Peckinpah's 1983 thriller *The Osterman Weekend* is a film about manipulating films and people through films. False television reports, specially edited clips from hidden cameras suggest a reality which is not actual but just a version of it. Everyone can come up with examples of how to trick our sense of truth by working on the images we tend to trust. When Stalin started to eliminate his former comrade Trotsky from photographs, he was able to do so successfully in part because images convey an immediate appeal or evidence which we find hard to object to.

It is precisely because of this mechanism of automatic plausibility that producing images and sending them around with the aid of mobile phones is attractive. Catching a health teacher smoking, a catholic priest in indecent exposure, or a young man attacking another, can lead to immediate consequences. Many have been attempted to try their Zola-moment of "j'accuse!". On the other hand, taking pictures with handheld devices can also be risky for the same reason, namely that everybody believes to be true what is caught and stored on the machine. There are reports of journalists and other digitally equipped bystanders of public events in undemocratic countries being beaten and even, in one case reported from China, killed by police.

The private use and abuse of images so easily produced includes many phenomena which I cannot go into here. There is the voluntary setting up of events: fake rape, fake torture, even fake murder on video do exist, as does real violence started for the sole purpose of filming it ("happy slapping"). The pornography industry which inspires much of internet imagery seems to have countless individual followers, people obsessed with opportunities of superseding reality through images of their own creation.

My hunch is that unlike texts and despite their inherent power, images have a hard time changing reality. However incriminating, individual witness accounts of wrongdoers caught by a photo do not build a case which can go to court. However shocking, private shots of disasters and catastrophes do not tell a story which could be printed. However revealing, self-images do not automatically constitute biographical evidence which others can understand. Images lose their power out of context, and context here is in most cases literally a text, for example a blog. Think of how many images fill the internet and then think of how little knowledge has changed as a result of this.

My conclusion would consist in sketching a new research field. I think we need to analyze the close relation of images and texts where they are most intimately linked together, that is, the internet. We should find out what makes discourse in the long run so much more effective than images in convincing us of new truths. Blogs give images a meaning which they cannot have by themselves, and only commentaries turn videos, let us say some footage from 9/11, into arguments pertinent to a debate about historical evidence.

In the field of research opened up by these tentative remarks, I would like to include an investigation of the human mind and look at our tendency to always combine information according to earlier experiences, as well as our constant lust for fiction. This is the psychological aspect of private image production. There is a technological aspect too. We need to start an analysis of methods used in screening and ranking images by search engines. These engines need to be able to filter pornography out and consequently have inbuilt censorship mechanisms. Finally, a philosophical point could deal with Foucault's notion of counter-knowledge. I am interested in finding out how knowledge can be changed or altered, even replaced, by individuals when, as is true with the internet, every new input is processed by systems only global corporations control. The question of where counter-knowledge can be located comes down to an investigation of the internet as a new place for publication and as a new reality for the public sphere.