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Approaches to Instant Knowledge and The New Media Technologies

Theo Hug

‘Information is free – knowledge is priceless’ (author unknown)

Abstract

The fashionable terms ‘Infotainment’ or ‘Edutainment’ seem to imply an experiential, entertaining way of knowledge acquisition. They are associated with free information and unpaid knowledge on the one hand, on the other, they refer to a quite informal information and knowledge environment. The production and organization of knowledge is affected by technological developments, i.e. digitalisation, commercialisation and convergence of media. All of a sudden, a particular knowledge type of the information age – ‘instant knowledge’ – can be identified. This new knowledge type can roughly be described as ‘first-sight-knowledge,’ which is universally comprehended, easily and instantly understood and entertaining. In the following article this new ‘instant’ knowledge type will be defined in its relation to other types of knowledge.

Introduction¹

Although the debate on postmodernism seems to fade at the end of this millennium, it has brought about a variety of metatexts, which have altered our view of the social environment and have provided ideas for a new framework for the analysis of societies and cultures. One of these metatexts is without doubt “The End of the Great Narratives,” by which Jean-François Lyotard (1986) condenses his analysis of knowledge levels in so called “highly developed societies.” According to his view, knowledge was in the sphere of modernity closely tied to an – for lack of a better word – “ideological” framework, i.e. the emancipation of humanity or prosperity of everybody through capitalism. These common “modern” ideologies have lost their obligation and power of legitimation in the 20th century. A further modern diagnosis is for example provided by the growing need within the modern economy for increasing business management calculation. According to this thesis, profitable and digitalised knowledge seems to dominate today more than ever. It can be argued that scientific and commercial knowledge types merge within the economy of knowledge. By employing his everyday observation, George Ritzer (1993) describes a broad pallet of societal phenomena as

¹ This contribution is dedicated to Bernhard Rathmayr on the occasion of his 65th birthday – in remembrance of our collaboration on issues of use, distribution, and trivialization of knowledge.

“McDonaldisation.” In close conjunction with Max Weber’s view on the ‘process of rationalisation’ (1976), Ritzer claims, that production and economy of the worldwide fast food restaurant chain with the same name can be described as an expression of the widespread philosophy of life. Weighing the advantages and disadvantages of the process of rationalisation, we can conclude that the pace of the described trend is bound to continue; however, it could be slowed by alternative strategies. It is obvious that the current process of globalization strengthens these trends considerably.

1. Characterisation of Instant Knowledge

What do we mean when we speak of ‘knowledge’? In everyday life, this question is easily answered. For example we respond to the request to describe ‘knowledge’ in everyday terms as follows: “Oh yes, you have learned: ‘that is that,’ something about which you are sure.” However, in philosophical or scientific contexts, the term ‘knowledge’ is associated with a variety of definitions. For instance, the term ‘knowledge’ represents

- tested know how
- established belief (though not in a religious sense)
- socially defined construction of ‘the world’
- symbolic representation of societal practice
- collectively accessible orientations
- ideal models
- bundled or arranged information
- transmission of meaning

It becomes obvious, even when reviewing the above list of variations of ‘knowledge,’ which serves illustrative purposes, that definitions of ‘knowledge’ are related to social, cultural, discursive or scientific contexts. These ‘knowledge’ types themselves as well as their interwovenness to other areas of phenomena, such as thinking, acting, perceiving, reminding, feeling or learning are, however, highly controversial. According to the definitions of knowledge as listed above, different models of instant knowledge can be specified.

Before discussing ‘instant knowledge’ from theoretical perspectives, the following characteristics might support a preliminary, pre-theoretical understanding. Instant Knowledge is

- easily and immediately understood
- seemingly not in need of much explanation
- entertaining or anecdotal
- popularized and useful in easily convincing
- briefly explains questionable problems
- based on simplified descriptions and refers to collective symbols or group fantasies
- and it makes complex descriptions seemingly superfluous.

This type of knowledge is not to be paired with everyday knowledge, despite some relationships in language. Instant knowledge implies the everyday–knowledge–format of ‘taking it for granted’, on which notion everyday action is based. However, the unquestionable worldview of the notion ‘taking it for granted’ has also entered scientific discourse. Occasionally, it can be observed that conventional and traditional methods of scientific analysis are influenced by ready-made knowledge formats, which originate in everyday life of the information society.

‘Instant knowledge’ formats provide the common and mass appeal level of media discourse: ‘cool’ and ‘happy.’ However, this knowledge level cannot only be applied to the so called ‘expert’-discourse on television, whose statement is standardized, for example, by explaining new forms of violence in our society in the ‘sound-bite’ modality of 20 sentences, 300 words, 40 seconds. Instant knowledge has not only reached the academic discourse, it is – moreover – reconstructed in educational contexts. This process might be supported by the tendency of some educators, particularly those, who prefer linear didactic models.

This brief characterisation may provoke cultural pessimism. From a postmodern point of view, its pace, clearness, and spontaneity seems to easily establish intersubjectivity.

2. Approaches to Instant Knowledge

How about theoretical motivated description of “suddenness” or easily digestible first-sight-knowledge? In view of the variety of connotations, I will argue in exemplary terms. My choice is limited to five approaches: an everyday theoretical, a radical constructivist, a social constructivist, a social theoretical as well as an approach from the viewpoint of media theory.

2.1 The Subjective Stocks of Knowledge And The Increased Need For Ready-Made Units

Instant knowledge can be distinguished from everyday knowledge. This statement also serves as a first hypothesis or axiom. Some clues for a more precise definition of instant knowledge can be found in the context of social theory, particularly theories of everyday and life world theories (cf. Alfred Schütz & Thomas Luckmann 1979/1984). Schütz and Luckmann, differentiate the interrelational build-up level of knowledge which could be interpreted as superficial on the one hand, but also as deep, on the other. This theory supports the understanding of subjective biographic ‘stocks’ of knowledge. Common knowledge develops, based on this assumption, and is modified by idiosyncratic structures of social solutions. Typics and ‘social structures of relevance’ (as Alfred Schütz argues) additionally furnish this modification process. Ready-made units are then integrated into the subjective ‘stocks’ of knowledge. Problematic situations are solved not in discourse, but by situational adequate solutions, based on routines and habitual knowledge. In the light of social phenomenological conception, instant knowledge can be described

- as situative re-pragmatisation of formerly theoretical motivated knowledge segments
- as a problematic fusion of widely familiar, i.e. common and subjective, i.e. intimate knowledge
- or as an attempt to solve the dilemma of reliance on everyday knowledge on one side, and on the other side, the insufficiency in regard to overcoming problematic situations.

New forms of problematical situations and open horizons of problems have emerged, hand in hand with a confusion of life contexts, which cannot be adequately solved by traditional individual stocks of knowledge. The need for ready-made units increases, which are inserted into 'stocks' of knowledge. However, these ready-made instant knowledge formats are problematic. They are problematic because the formerly differentiated knowledge categories, such as 'specialized' knowledge (Sonderwissen) and common knowledge have changed their specific relation. Today, access to 'specialized' knowledge, which involves a learned interpretation background, is easily accessible, simply because 'specialized' knowledge is reformatted into instant knowledge. Based on this development and a modified worldview, the structures and horizons of life world have shifted into the "unquestioned given world," or in today's terminology, the "unquestioned given world of cyberspace."

2.2 The Complexity of the World and the "Simplicity Complex"

A second hypothesis or axiom can be described in such a fashion, that the theory of instant knowledge is closely related to the theory of Radical Constructivism. I will limit my discussion on some aspects of Ernst v. Glasersfeld's approach. As an important characteristic of the Radical Constructivism he describes the probational building-up of a theory of knowledge without ontological claims. With this statement, the assumption of an independent reality from knowing is fortified. Human knowledge is referred to the subjective world of experience, which is characterised among other things through the so-called "simplicity complex" (Einfachheitskomplex): "We have the indomitable urge to simplify our experiences, in order to predict and control it." (cf. Glasersfeld 1997, p. 78). It exactly is this urge that seduces us into making the assumption, that "the real world is a world of frightening complexity" (p. 78). When we succeed in organizing our experiences, everything is in order. And we believe we manage reality. When problematic situations occur we tend to conclude, "that we have not yet found the rules, which drive this disturbing complexity of the universe" (p. 78). Or in other words, we have not yet discovered a practicable or viable way of thinking and acting. In this sense, it depends always on our context of action how "simple or complex" our notion of a "prevailing area of experience ought to be understood in order that our actions have an adequate chance of success" (p. 84). The attempts of categorisation and differentiation are affected without exception in the sense of conceptual economy. They are made in any case by us. Instant knowledge can be described, in a very general sense, as a renunciation of unnecessary production of complexity. This refers to everyday life as such and is not simply a result, as it is often argued, of mass communication in a mediated society. The building-up of knowledge takes place on all levels of experience segmentation, development of useful schemes and conceptual structures on the level of reflexive abstraction following the motto: "So simple as possible and so complex as necessary" (cf. Glasersfeld 1997, p. 87). The ques-

tion remains unanswered: which special scheme in the media socialization ought to be developed and which special assimilation and accommodation performances are bound with it?

2.3 High Tech – High Life – High Skills

In recent decades, social constructionism has discussed questions and problems of human existence against the background of changes in conjunction with developments in low- and high-technology. Kenneth J. Gergen (1996) in particular describes in a vivid way, how the new technologies force us to enter into a refined relationship with more and more human beings and institutions. Computers, e-mail, fax and satellites accelerate and intensify social integration. We are always confronted with new situations, persons, circumstances, constellations and increase inevitably our knowledge of the social world and our capacity to move in it (cf. Gergen 1996, p. 125). The increase in the societal stimuli moves on a circumstance of repletion which prepares the grounds for “radical change in our everyday experience of the self and others too for an unbridled relativism within academic circles” (ibid., 1996, p. 16). The world of everyday life “as unquestionable ground” (Schütz & Luckmann 1979), is simply given. However, the natural state of consciousness of “normal adults in the disposition of healthy human understanding” (1979) has become problematic as a reference point. The source of reference and belonging have become plural, fragmented and episodic (cf. Bauman 1995, p. 49). We are confronted with a variety of explanations of the world: from family members, medical practitioners, politicians, friends, moderators, scientists and philosophers. All of them tell us, “how things really are.” Along go descriptions of facts, and reasons, which bear awakening qualities (cf. Gergen 1996, p. 198); knowledge transforms into an expression of specified realities of various groups. High skills are demanded, skillfulness and knowledge, which promise flexible and successful progress in all situations, or in other words: the technology of social repletion requires situational and contextual related useful immediate knowledge, which can be ‘trusted’ in different fields of communal discourse.

2.4 Experiential Orientation and Experiential Knowledge

As already discussed, the emotive dimension of knowledge has been ignored. Gerhard Schulze tried to take this perspective in his voluminous study on “Experiential Society” (1995). In this analysis, he highlights the change of basic views of life and their transformation into a new widely spread endeavour, which supports the organisation of as many situations as possible in a pleasant and satisfactory way. The smallest common denominator of views of life in our society is represented in this view, in the organisational ideas “of a beautiful, interesting, subjective and experienced life” (p. 37). This experiential rationality can be described as “systematisation of experiential orientation” (p. 40).

He argues that the subject becomes the object, by instrumentalising situations for experiential purposes. The ‘experiential rationality’ thus formed is the attempt to trigger off outward conditions in order to achieve desired subjective processes. A human being becomes the manager of his own subjectivity and manipulator of his or her internal life. In course of time, experience-oriented action hardens itself to goal-oriented routines. The schematisation of

experiential rationality is not a private affair. Common types of rationality are built up. They serve as orientation in case someone wants to act in an experiential rational way (cf. Schulze 1995, p. 40). If someone lacks knowledge of orientation, this rationality of experiential provides easy answers.

Schulze assumes, almost like Gergen (1996), that the far greater part of the existence of knowledge is organised in a specific milieu. Varieties of possibilities of description of more instant, specific milieu forms of knowledge open themselves up with it. For purposes of this discussion, I maintain, that instant knowledge provides such a knowledge format, which convinces by the convenience of the accompanying emotion or by the grade of the psycho-physical satisfaction. It does not refer to adequate reasoning.

2.5 Mass Knowledge in the Service of Power Interests

The fifth approach to instant knowledge can be described as politically motivated. This approach refers to Noam Chomsky's and Heinz Dietrich's (1996) media and cultural theory. According to these authors, audiovisual media communication serve mainly as indoctrination of the masses in the liberal democracies. Just a few powerful transnational industries create national and international "manufacturing of consent" (cf. Herman & Chomsky 1988, Achbar & Wintnock 1992, Achbar 1996). This process should not be understood in the sense of the theory of conspiracy, according to which a small group of persons pursues a plan (cf. Chomsky & Dietrich 1996, p. 155). It results in a combination of ideological necessities of power, patriarchal mentality of accomplishment and those imperatives, which stem from the requirement of production of more wealth and surplus value (Mehrwert). The appearance of instant communication in cyberspace seems to be a temporally state-of-the-art of series of technical information in the context of cultural revolution, which have their starting point with the letterpress (cf. Chomsky & Dietrich 1996, p. 156), and have brought about a radical overcoming of so far conventional borders of space and time. These new possibilities of knowledge acquisition, developed on the basis of an extensive database, open up access to differentiated analyses for societal minorities. Entertaining first sight mass media knowledge reinforces in this viewpoint the influential power of transnational companies and political elites.

3. Conclusion

These approaches provide a preliminary analysis. They offer some points of departure for further investigations and they might also stimulate a differentiation of the five outlined variants. With this in mind, let us conclude by highlighting inherent ambivalencies and controversies:

- The development of local and global cultures can not be reduced to the processes of "McDonaldisation" and "trivialisation". With the ex-differentiation of knowledge exis-

tence, new forms of differentiation develop. The different mass media offer, for example, not only simplifying forms of scientific thinking, but also complex forms, as well as possibilities of entry in full claim of reflection, which may serve as the deciphering and destruction of the techno–imagination.

- Analogically, new varieties of re-contextualisation develop hand in hand with the phenomenon of the de-contextualisation of knowledge. The detachment from the informational offer of prevailing contextual developments does not necessarily mean inevitable irritation, ahistoricity and arbitrariness in further use. The phenomenon of individualisation can be highlighted on one hand. On the other, it is portrayed as recollectivisation (cf. Volkmer 1998). Furthermore, certain stereotypical simplifications of curricular query can be questioned by a few mouseclicks and lead to more detailed considerations.
- Cyberspace does not only open up the possibilities of new imperialistic accomplishment of military, socio–political or economic interest of power, but also democratic, emancipational, feminist, aesthetic and educational options. The ‘subject’ only exists in regard to a media discourse. The development of knowledge is determined neither in individual nor in collective regard in the sense of simple causal relationships through the development of the media. Rather a complex teamwork of technological, social and cultural aspects or – concise with the view of the conception from Siegfried Schmidt (1996, p. 4) – of cognition, communication, media and culture is to be taken into consideration. With new computer technologies new chances of creative and innovative media production have developed for the new generations, which elude the control of at least partially the power possessing authority.
- The easily digestible knowledge of ‘first sight’ does not express its consequences, like love at first sight. A pure cognitive way of observation will not lead to a satisfactory result. On the contrary the consideration of “affectological” perspectives (cf. Ciompi 1997) emphasises itself as especially fruitful.

What in detail proves to be instant knowledge finally depends on the contextual use and the observational perspective. In this sense it is the observer’s relativity, whether he or she accepts the above explanation primarily as immediate instant knowledge or as a portrayal of current questions of knowledge development. Hopefully both cases bear inspiration for further analysis.

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