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## **Introduction. Non-Knowledge and Digital Cultures** 2018

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# **Introduction: Non-Knowledge and Digital Cultures**

**Matthias Koch**

**Digital media today are accompanied by emphatic stances on knowledge, non-knowledge, and their relation to one another. Generating, distributing, and making available massive amounts of data that take form by modeling, digital media provide us with abundant information and potentially new ways of gaining knowledge. This has been attracting various, sometimes radical scenarios in which technology either eliminates non-knowledge or plants it deep within contemporary cultures, due to the alleged universal power and opacity of algorithms. Both conceptualizing and researching non-knowledge have proven to be epistemological challenges that are key to understanding contemporary digital cultures.**

- 12 The great number of twentieth and twenty-first century discourses on non-knowledge can, among other factors, be linked to such diverse aspects as automatization and media historical developments, risk management, a rise in prognostics, ecological and social developments, or the perception of a general rise in complexity (Wehling 2009). Non-knowledge has shown to be a pervasive topic, be it in political and economic debates, amongst the general public or in a huge number of academic fields. In the latter, the twentieth century saw a strongly growing interest in epistemology, in criticizing traditional concepts of knowledge, in unveiling and analyzing unquestioned premises of research, ideas of self-evidence, and blind spots. From a perspective of contemporary history directed at the status of digital media, the broad and often emphatic discussions of non-knowledge may be seen as a “symptom of a fundamental uncertainty about our mechanized life-world” (Burkhardt 2017, 57, translated by the author). At the same time, histories and theories of non-knowledge need to reflect on themselves as being part of a long-standing tradition of questioning the status of knowledge—a temporal horizon going way beyond the twentieth century, with roots in antique skepticism or the philosophies of enlightenment.

When dealing with these debates and the problems they articulate, a characteristic terminological diversity quickly becomes apparent. In the English language, *non-knowledge*, *nescience*, and *ignorance*, with the latter arguably being the most common one, all concern closely related problems (for an attempt at theoretical differentiation cf. Gross 2010, 53–56). While these expressions each have individual etymologies and conceptual histories, they share a semantic field and the attempt to signify something that poses grave epistemological problems to conceptualization. Therefore, speaking of *Non-knowledge and Digital Cultures* neither excludes other existing terms nor does it claim to deliver a theory exclusively tied to this expression. Rather, emphasizing the expression *non-knowledge* serves

to direct attention to “the ‘natural’ reverse side of knowledge” (Gross 2016, 313), i.e. to their reciprocal relation.

Corresponding to the great diversity of thematic contexts in which non-knowledge is being discussed, there is a huge variety when it comes to analytically determining that which is called non-knowledge. For example, non-knowledge can be regarded as factual absence of knowledge, as a conscious or non-conscious state of *not knowing something*. This notion can, for example, be virulent in questions about the relation between the growth of knowledge and the respective growth of non-knowledge in science, in taking non-knowledge as a productive force, in differentiations between unspecified and specified non-knowledge, in assumptions about fundamentally unknowable things (“Ignorabimus”), in a conscious or non-conscious attitude of ignoring facts or a decision not to know something, or in intentionally obfuscating knowledge and keeping another party from knowing. Here, the expression *non-knowledge* stands in for something that is not, not yet, or not supposed to be known, that is not at all accessible, that is a result of ignoring facts or that is concomitant with gaining knowledge. Non-knowledge in this sense may be seen as an obstacle in need of overcoming, as a necessity in the development of knowledge, or even as a fundamental human right, i.e. in the case of debates on genetic diagnostics.

One of the key epistemological aspects in these and many other contexts is whether the relation between non-knowledge and knowledge is modeled as an oppositional one (non-knowledge *not being knowledge*) or as a complementary one (non-knowledge being the *flipside of knowledge*). It seems more productive to describe this relation in the latter sense: given, for example, that the conscious or non-conscious determination of anything as knowledge, knowable, or worthy of knowing will always entail the exclusion of something else as non-knowledge, not knowable, or ignorable. Also, in research, theoretical framework, selection of sources, hypotheses, institutional factors, social contexts

- 14 and structures of power lead to both including and excluding specific questions and topics. Furthermore, only when reflecting upon this complementary relation does it become possible to acknowledge and discuss the structuring function of the non-conscious structures and regularities of cultural techniques, tacit knowing, or historical a prioris, i.e. the non-conscious ratio constitutive of individual and collective practices. In return, conceptualizing non-knowledge this way necessarily determines the assessment of research itself, a relation prominently represented by a certain understanding of media theory.

The specific methodology of media knowledge displays itself in the insistent relation that it maintains to non-knowledge. ... [It] sounds out the conditions of ... rules of enunciation insofar as they cannot be perceived or are constitutively occluded. (Holl 2015, 84)

One could argue that *non-knowledge*, *ignorance*, or *nescience*—expressions rather than *termini technici*—are conceptually productive, both individually and as parts of a shared semantic field, precisely because they are logically underdetermined. In other words, the logical ambiguity and negativity of these expressions correspond to the characteristics of what they try to grasp. They are reminiscent of the way in which, drawing on Claude Lévi-Strauss, floating signifiers work. These signifiers “occur to represent an indeterminate value of signification, in itself devoid of meaning and thus susceptible of receiving any meaning at all; their sole function is to fill a gap between signifier and the signified” (Lévi-Strauss 1987, 55f.). Building on Lévi-Strauss, Ernesto Laclau speaks of empty signifiers: being universalistic and underdetermined at the same time, their function lies in stabilizing hegemonic discourses. Such a signifier represents the “theoretical possibility of something that indicates the discursive presence of its own limits from within the process of signifying” (Laclau 1996, 36). An empty signifier stands in for a structural impossibility of signifying. Laclau’s critical view would serve well in discussing the political implications and biases of

non-knowledge discourses, e.g., regarding debates on Big Data, surveillance, and the right to anonymity.

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Despite the differences between the aforementioned aspects of that which is called non-knowledge, ignorance, or nescience, the difficulties of gaining insight into it are what these expressions have in common: all of them logically determine non-knowledge primarily via its opacity and implicitness. In this sense, all of them rest on the term being a signifier without a fixable signified. Given that the term non-knowledge points to something that, logically speaking, is a negative, conceptualizing it as a floating or empty signifier could highlight some key difficulties in signification.

Discussing the epistemological challenges tied to non-knowledge and its relation to knowledge is of great value to digital cultures research. It brings up the question of whether digital technology goes along with a qualitatively new mode of entangling knowing and not knowing. This question currently fuels vast amounts of research, attracting both emphatic stances on the alleged revolutionary nature of digital technology and careful, tentative descriptions of the historical, technological, and epistemological conditions of knowing and not knowing today. One prominent topos in current research is that at the core of contemporary media culture there is a fundamental epistemic opacity (Humphreys 2009), which relates to thoughts about the unrepresentability of algorithms (Galloway 2012, 78–100) and their governmental power (Rouvroy 2011). Other key factors for this opacity are found in the ubiquity of digital media and their deep insertion into all sorts of everyday practices, perception, and body techniques, leading up to a “transformation of the contemporary affective fabrics” (Baxmann, Beyes, and Pias 2012, 9, translated by the author). All-encompassing and altering the capacities of sensation, such a situation has been called an ecology of affect (Angerer 2017).

All this makes digital cultures research a prominent case of the perceived contemporary crisis of representation, and focusing on

- 16 non-knowledge promises to deliver valuable insights into these epistemological dilemmas. It implies discussing the means, range, and limits of current scientific description and understanding. It also highlights the basic questions of what is thought of as known/not known and knowable/not knowable today, the various historical contexts of today's situation, and even the question of whether one can operationalize non-knowledge to learn about digital cultures. Relating non-knowledge to digital cultures may not only tell us something about the status of digital media as a topic of research, it may also tell us something about the status of contemporary interdisciplinary media research itself.

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