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The Circulation of Knowledge in Public Discourse—Between 'Popularization' and 'Populization'

Abstract: The main objective of this paper is to investigate the circulation of knowledge in public discourse. Two models of circulation, which could be called the 'popularization' and 'populization' of knowledge, are discussed. The first is identified with the traditional activity of academic elites and usually involves informing the general public about scientific discoveries and translating hermetic academic jargon into language accessible to a wider audience. The second attempts to describe the process whereby the dominant administrators of scientific knowledge lose their monopoly position. An especially valuable proposal for describing 'popularization' and 'populization' is the category of 'de-distantiation' (the reduction and weakening of distances in social relations) invented by Karl Mannheim. The circulation of knowledge is also considered as an important component of modernization and anti-modernization discourse.

Keywords: circulation of knowledge, knowledge society, public sphere, discourse, journalism, myth of universal competence

Introduction:

The Circulation of Knowledge and the Democratization of Culture

The main objective of this paper is to investigate the circulation of knowledge in public discourse. What is involved is analysis of two partially competing models of circulation, which can be called the 'popularization' and 'populization' of knowledge.¹ The first is identified with the traditional activity of academic elites and usually takes the shape of informing the general public about scientific discoveries and translating the hermetic academic jargon into language accessible to a wider audience. This model stems from the conviction that the world of scientists and laymen is deeply divided, and overcoming this difference is only limitedly possible. The second model, which for the purposes of this paper is called the 'populization' of knowledge, attempts to describe the process whereby the current (elite) administrators of scientific knowledge lose their monopoly position. Observation of contemporary social practices leads to the conclusion that the number of areas and disciplines within which scientists can count on unconditional deference is drastically shrinking. In many areas, their position is undermined by the scepticism of representatives of spheres that do not have institutional legitimacy or are legitimized in a way that scientific institutions find controversial. This applies to politicians, journalists, civil activists, new social

¹ The term 'populization of knowledge' and the distinction between 'popularization' and 'populization' was formulated by Marek Czyżewski.

movements, NGOs, religious institutions, think-tanks, artists, and determined amateur enthusiasts. Many of these successfully defend themselves against labels of ‘counter-knowledge’ or ‘pseudo-science,’ and seek supporters within channels not necessarily sanctioned by scientists.

In analyzing public discourse, particular attention should be devoted to those forms of knowledge that are present in debates on social issues publicly defined as important. Many are accompanied by the language of science and technology. Attempts to use this language as an instrument are particularly evident in conflicts over controversial topics—including those currently associated with medical procedures (such as *in vitro* treatments, public vaccination programs, stem cell research, or nanotechnology), genetically modified organisms, climate change, and atomic energy. Examples of disputes that involve both the authority of scholars and contributions from non-specialists can be found not only among the medical sciences and natural sciences. There are also public conflicts over issues more closely related with the social sciences: economic issues (such as the causes of the economic crisis), history (alternative descriptions of the past), and psychological or educational practices (the social status of psychotherapy and media counselling or different approaches to parental care).

This description of two models of the circulation of knowledge (‘popularization’ and ‘populization’) is intended to complement and expand existing studies on the representations of knowledge present in social life. Significant studies have already been conducted: *inter alia*, on the basis of media studies and discourse analysis. An important achievement of media studies has been its focus on the convergence of the information, education, and entertainment functions of the media, in terms of ‘infotainment’ (cf. [Thussu 2007](#)) and ‘edutainment’ (cf. [Lehmkuhl et al. 2012](#)). Discourse analysis has focused instead on the study of linguistic and semiotic practices related to popularization in the most common-sense way—making a communicative version of complex scientific content or elements of expert knowledge available to the general public. Analyses have addressed issues such as the recontextualization and reformulation of knowledge in media practice ([Calsamiglia and van Dijk 2004](#)), or the transfer of knowledge through an expert and a non-professional meeting face to face, for example, a physician and his patient (cf. [Gülich 2003](#)). Researchers in other disciplines have examined the issue of knowledge medialization (cf. [Petersen et al. 2010](#)), the impact of symbolic elites on the significance of a public controversy (cf. [Rafter 2014](#)), and the questioning of academic arrangements inside and outside the world of science (cf. [Collins 2014](#)).

The dominant studies have not taken an interest in the circulation of knowledge as an important component in the modernization and anti-modernization discourse. These elements, as well as the implicit and obvious ideological references, should be critically examined. This applies both to the overall transformation of the discourse, as well as to its placement in the social reality, including the media. An especially valuable conceptual proposal for describing ‘popularization’ and ‘populization,’ thus interpreted, is the category of de-distantiation invented by Karl Mannheim ([Mannheim 1956](#); [Czyżewski 2012](#)). De-distantiation is the reduction and weakening of distances in social relations and the opposite of distantiation—the production and support of distances. The directions that have been identified for the circulation of knowledge seem to be a good illustration of Mannheim’s

thesis concerning the radical negation of distance in contemporary social relations and the progressive democratization of culture. The diagnosis formulated by Mannheim is still valid at the beginning of the twenty-first century and allows us to show the problematic consequences of claims to equality in different spheres of life. Modern society has created conditions for intensive processes of de-distanciation in the production, circulation, and dissemination of knowledge. One consequence is the loss of communication distance and the progressive blurring of barriers between the various entities responsible for the production of knowledge in society. The increased importance of the pluralism of claims to knowledge and the pressure to recognize the legitimacy of forms of knowledge previously deprived of institutional legitimacy can also be observed.

This paper points to the importance of a pro-developmental model of bridging the gap between scientific and popular knowledge, which can be called modernization de-distanciation (see Table 1). These processes can be treated as part of a development strategy that is visible in both the elite ‘civilizing’ rhetoric—for example, in formulating public policies, creating special economic zones, building lifelong learning institutions, or instituting appropriate education reform (‘progressive’ popularization)—as well as among entities operating in the civil sphere, as exemplified by the grassroots, ‘civilizing’ pro-social actions of activists (‘progressive populization’).

On the other hand, researchers have not sufficiently recognized the development of counter-modernization de-distanciation (see Table 1): intensive processes of knowledge production that develop, as it were, contrary to the contemporary modernization discourse. Progressive circles might call these processes ‘reactionary’ popularization, which involves the opinions and actions of symbolic elites that challenge modernization discourse, and ‘reactionary’ populization, as expressed for example, in the actions of heterogeneous and sometimes mutually opposing social movements, which themselves declare their ‘conservatism’ in relation to dominant development programs or that have ‘obscurantism’ or a ‘reactionary character’ attributed to them by opponents.

Table 1

Type of De-distanciation—the Process of Bridging the Gap Between Scientific and Colloquial Knowledge

		Modernization de-distanciation	Counter-modernization de-distanciation
Circulation of knowledge	Popularization of knowledge	‘Progressive’ popularization (elitist ‘civilizing’ rhetoric, e.g. popularization of technological achievements)	‘Reactionary’ popularization (elitist ‘reactionary’ rhetoric, e.g. elitist critique of modernization discourses)
	Populization of knowledge	‘Progressive’ populization (the ‘civilizing’ civic activism, e.g. educational projects of civil activists)	‘Reactionary’ populization (bottom-up ‘reactionary’ rhetoric, e.g. opponents of vaccinations)

Due to the resulting significance in the public sphere, particular attention should be paid to ‘progressive’ popularization and ‘reactionary’ populization. The difference between the two is considered here in connection with the current processes of generating professional knowledge and expertise. Intensive processes of democratizing expert knowledge and the

growing aspirations of milieus traditionally not associated with the production of scientific knowledge raise the question of the contemporary status of experts and expert knowledge. It is already debatable who deserves this name today, especially when there are public disputes where various parties claim the right to the status of ‘true’ or ‘independent’ professionals. The media is also a place where views and opinions clash in ongoing public disputes, and where representatives of science often find themselves debating with representatives of the new elites and new authority—activists, NGO activists, leaders of social movements, or socially-engaged artists.

The Popularization of Knowledge and Modernization De-distantiation

The present popularization of knowledge is part of the growing demand, among media recipients, for discussion of complex elements of reality. The dissemination of knowledge has become one of many components of a syndrome of knowledge ‘oversaturation’ (a paradoxical conjunction of overproduction and regulation) that involves increased broadcasting of expert knowledge in public discourse, where experts from various disciplines participate in a simplified ‘translation of the world,’ providing recipients with readily understood descriptions, exegeses, and explanations about the world in which they live.

Popularization, if it is to be approached from various perspectives, is part of the wider cultural translational processes described in the literature in the context of the ‘translational turn’ (Bachmann-Medick 2008, Snell-Hornby 2009). These processes are associated with an extended notion of translation, which is identified not only with the linguistic-textual paradigm (that is, the translation of languages and texts), but is also treated as an ‘inalienable practice in a world of interdependence and networks’ (Bachmann-Medick 2006: 238). Translation, according to many researchers, has been elevated to one of the main concepts of the social sciences and humanities (Fuchs 2009).

The category of ‘translation,’ in accord with the ‘classical’ procedures for disseminating knowledge, involves crossing the gap between experts and novices. According to this logic, it is assumed that the hermetic language of science requires translation—a decoding procedure involving mediators, such as journalists. Their task is to mediate between two different discourses—the scientific/professional one and the colloquial. Greg Myers suggests that such thinking contains several tacit assumptions: scientists are the sole authorities for the creation of knowledge; recipients of knowledge are treated as ‘blank slates’ on which experts or specialists can record the information they consider important; knowledge transfer is unidirectional—flowing from the world of science to the public; in knowledge dissemination, scientific information not only changes form, but is simplified, distorted, or made more attractive (Myers 2003: 266).

The traditional model of disseminating knowledge presupposes a belief in the difference between ‘real science’ and ‘popularized’ content, which is subject to various degradation processes in relation to the ‘original.’ As Stephen Hilgartner writes (1990), the attitude to popularization ranges from affirmative (that is, seeing the need for such educational activities aimed at non-specialists and accepting the need to simplify) to deeply critical: perceiving procedures for the dissemination of knowledge in terms of a desecration, which

involves, on the one hand, usurpers and outsiders (journalists, writers, educators, and other problematic agents), and on the other, an unprepared audience, incapable of ‘appropriately’ assimilating content (Hilgartner 1990: 519). Between these two extremes there are arguments as to which forms of popularization are appropriate and which are not: what can be defended as a tolerable degree of depletion and falls within acceptable trivialization, and what becomes reprehensible vulgarization.

Observation of communication processes involving today’s symbolic elites invites us to consider the relevance of a model founded on the distinction between ‘real science’ and ‘popularized’ content, which is subject to various degradation processes in relation to the ‘original.’ Different ways of ‘simplifying’ knowledge are an inherent part of the work of a scholar, starting with research communication (for example, in a laboratory), writing, publishing reviews, and searching for funds from increasingly bureaucratic science-funding programs (Hilgartner 1990: 522). Various ‘intermediate stations,’ in which scientists are forced to ‘reformulate’ their message depending on the addressee, should also be considered (Ciapuscio 2003: 209).

In an alternate perspective of the relationship between expert and layman it may well appear that any dissemination of science—articles in journals across disciplines, participation in science festivals, and popular media presentations—should be treated as a continuum of the recontextualization of knowledge imposed by exposure to a specific recipient. As would be expected, making knowledge public is never the transfer of a complete message—a move from one community to another always creates new meanings. Instead of the gap between lay and expert discourse we should rather speak of a continuum of expression—from the most hermetic content to popular education formats (Bensaude-Vincent 2001: 100).

The dissemination of knowledge (which is taken for granted) is not a neutral fact—on the contrary, it is associated with power, influence and control. Popularization can be understood as a source of social domination in public discourse, as well as a self-legitimizing strategy that allows the authority of a scientist to be reinforced as a necessary mediator between the ‘caste of the enlightened’ and ‘the laymen’ who understand little. In this approach, researchers simultaneously consolidate the boundaries of division and simulate attempts to cross it. Instead of fighting public ignorance, they perpetuate the belief in the necessity of experts (Bensaude-Vincent 2001: 100). As a result, representatives of various research disciplines acquire the skills to adapt flexibly to different audiences; they either adopt the practice of simplifying and adapting knowledge to a mass audience, or don the mask of a purist who arbitrarily denounces examples of unacceptable simplifications (Hilgartner 1990: 520). In this sceptical perspective popularization practices are also used for pushing agendas that certain experts deem appropriate or condemning those they do not support. On the one hand, the dissemination of knowledge can authenticate certain public policies (health, education, and security); on the other, it can persuade a mass audience to support niche or unpopular research programs. The popularization of science is therefore an instrument of power, which is used depending on need. When convenient, it serves to ‘sway’ the layman; when the need is to emphasize the importance of scholarly authority, it is used to expose inconvenient popular opinions (Hilgartner 1990: 531).

Another dimension of the relationship of power with the dissemination of knowledge is its involvement in subtle practices of governing that emphasize ‘agency,’ ‘empowerment,’

‘individual responsibility,’ and ‘life-long learning.’ Michel Foucault calls this characteristic of the modern way of ruling populations ‘governmentality’ (Foucault 2008). Its contemporary sense is not only to direct, control, and discipline the individual but also to make him more intelligent, productive, fulfilled, and self-satisfied (Rose 1998). Modern procedures for the dissemination of knowledge reveal a relationship that Foucault describes as ‘the way one conducts the conduct of man’ (Foucault 2008: 186). Currently, this relationship assumes the complex form of ‘educationalization’ (or ‘pedagogization’) of discourse, which involves the expansion of educational semantics beyond the disciplines directly related to education and upbringing (Depaepe et al. 2008; Depaepe and Smeyers 2008; Czyżewski 2013). Educationalization promotes patterns of conduct desirable in ‘modern times’ and shapes daily habits of using the knowledge generated by science. The transformation of social practices and the mentality of citizens are linked, among other things, to the media’s use of concepts taken from the social sciences—that is, from economics, psychology, sociology, and pedagogy—in areas such as business psychology, media counselling, or the entertainment formats of educational activities.

This perspective suggests treating knowledge dissemination practices (in this case, in psychology, sociology, and social pedagogy) as a transmission belt for the rhetoric of emancipation, which is used in modern society mainly for pragmatic and optimization purposes. The promotion and dissemination of knowledge is one of the processes of controlling subjectivity, which is an important part of contemporary modernization strategy. In this perspective, the popularization of knowledge does not—paradoxically—extend the autonomy of the individual and challenge the existing mechanisms of power, but rather supports policy harmonizing the society: preparing and adapting individuals for changes in society, preventing crises, and minimizing risks. The real purpose of disseminating knowledge seems to be the hope of producing conflict-free social relations, and its unconscious function remains participation in the harmonious governance of society, along with a general tendency to control risks, and avoid tensions, chaos, and blind chance.

This view of the dissemination of knowledge is in line with the study of contemporary discourses of modernization in Poland (cf. Jemilniak & Koźmiński 2008, Gwóźdź 2010), which seek solutions for the next ‘civilizational leap’ after the 1989 transformation and accession to the European Union. Knowledge ‘oversaturation’ should be understood here as an element of a relatively new development project, an alternative to the imitative strategy of modernization through EU integration that has been dominant for many years. After accession, the pace seemed to slow. The previous discourses of modernization lost currency, and the dominant one is now the narrative built around a ‘knowledge-based economy’ with the accompanying ideas of a ‘knowledge society,’ ‘creative industries,’ and ‘life-long learning.’ The desired result of implementing the new narrative of modernization is to set the economy in a new direction, increase innovativeness, and reformulate labour roles. In such a context, knowledge and scientific work cease to be ends in themselves and become instrumental and subject to application. The public rationale for research focuses on its practical applications—its direct implementation in the business sphere.

This has involved reconsidering the question of the return impact of knowledge dissemination on the state of research disciplines themselves. Such disciplines increasingly adapt to the conditions set by external entities—the media, the economy, and the creators

of public policy. These phenomena are described, *inter alia*, as a transition from the ‘first’ to ‘second’ mode of knowledge production, in which science created in the academic world must respond to the ever more aggressively formulated expectations of the market and of public communication (Gibbons et al. 1994). As a result of these processes, the success and value of research is increasingly often associated with the ability to provide specific products for business or to present regular research results for the media market.

The Populization of Knowledge and Counter-modernization de-distanciation

The dominant view of the popularization of knowledge can hardly be considered adequate if the real changes occurring today in the social circulation of knowledge are taken into account. Today’s citizens can hardly be treated as blank pages onto which specialists transfer their findings. New knowledge is routinely incorporated into the daily habits of most non-experts, remodelling and changing their habits (Giddens 1991). Exposure to the discourse of experts and to alternative communication channels (such as the internet) have to a degree familiarized people with the hermetic world of science today. Recipients of popularizing content do not receive it uncritically while granting researchers their boundless confidence. They not only select the entities they are prepared to consider as authorities, they also aspire to be alternative sources of knowledge themselves.

The sociological viewpoint requires adoption of a broad understanding, in which the researcher ‘must regard “knowledge” as everything that has been or is deemed knowledge in the periods and collectivities he studies’ (Znaniecki 1984: 15), and therefore also that which may not be considered knowledge in the opinion of academia. It is worth drawing attention to the procedures for publicizing, translating, and assigning general validity to sources of knowledge that were previously either devoid of legitimacy, or had only local, peripheral, or sub-cultural significance. Analysis should include the strategies of social movements, think tanks, and non-governmental organizations, which did not previously speak in public or which directed their messages only to hermetic audiences in selected niches (for example, those connected to the ecology or alternative medical or economic knowledge). For researchers into the circulation of knowledge, this issue opens entirely new questions related, for example, to the significance of internet use—posts on internet forums; activity in social media, portals and blogs; sharing podcasts and videos, and distributing independent documentaries.

Studying various ‘conquests of interpretation’ (Michel Foucault’s term) in the practice of non-academic milieus makes it possible to show that the direction in which knowledge circulates is not evident today. Knowledge can be generated among the elite and flow down to ‘the man in the street’ (Alfred Schütz’s phrase)—or the opposite. It can be formed from the bottom up (for example within social movements) and later be intercepted by journalists, environmentalists, or leaders of political opinion. Its instrumental application can be seen in the pressure exerted on governments in decisions about the economy or environmental protection: analyses produced independently of state institutions or major research centres can change legislation. Much more frequently than in the past, there have also been direct confrontations (in TV studios or newspapers) between specialists and non-specialists

who would earlier not have had a chance to ‘meet’ in the public sphere. The ‘traditional’ owners of scientific knowledge can be challenged by representatives of non-scientific circles. Alternative stances are often supported by professionalized analytical procedures and specialized research instrumentation. Those who hold such views justify their motivation and confidence in their case by reference to their own beliefs (for example, religion) or the backing of a recognized public authority.

The contemporary ‘populization’ of knowledge is accompanied by the growing ‘myth of universal competence’: a ‘belief prevalent in a given society that almost every member has sufficient powers to declare final judgments on all matters relating to public affairs’ (Rakus 2009: 107). Such a belief is accompanied by a tacit assumption about the status of today’s knowledge—all citizens, regardless of their education, are able to give competent judgments on (almost) every issue, however complex. Society’s ongoing ‘oversaturation’ with knowledge only confirms these ideas. On the one hand, experts in one field are encouraged to formulate categorical judgments about another; on the other hand, it contributes to the more-and-more educated man in the street’s belief in the sufficiency of his own intellectual resources for forming a view on any topic.

The myth of universal competence—paradoxically—aligns with the idealized vision of public life in which relevant matters are decided by active members of society defending their viewpoints in the public forum (Rakus 2009: 112). The scope of citizens’ preparation and experience in deciding affairs of the highest importance becomes a secondary issue, subordinate to the idea of open discussion and an inclusive public sphere. A clear example of an area in which the myth of universal competence has spread is today’s economy. Persons of varying social status and levels of knowledge—politicians, experts, journalists, clerics, and laymen—dispute the most difficult economic issues. Some representatives of these groups openly oppose the principles of economics recognized by the discipline and challenge the academic paradigms. Using a journalistic abbreviation, David Henderson called such opinions on economic issues, which are devoid of academic basis, ‘DIY-economics’ (Henderson 1986: 75, Rakus 2009: 112). Intuitive beliefs are usually uncritical in regard to their own assumptions and often claim universal validity.

A concept akin to the myth of universal competence is the *I*-pistemology described by Liesbet van Zoonen (2012). The author ponders what has made modern people turn to themselves as an alternative source of knowledge and understanding, and how the personal perspective and people’s own experience are becoming more important to them than the findings of modern science.

This situation is a result not only of the rhetoric of an inclusive public sphere associated with the myth of universal competence, but also the extended scope of the basic rules of learning, which since the Enlightenment have included: organized scepticism, the questioning of established truths, and the undermining of previous assertions (Aupers 2012: 26). Since the eighteenth century, methodological doubt has been part of the scientific attitude toward the unscientific (such as the teachings of the Church). In time, this tool of thought derived from Enlightenment scientism turned against science itself and struck at its very foundation. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century, it reached its most developed form in the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’—the works of Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx. At the same time, many classic texts of sociological thought, including first and foremost

those by Auguste Comte and Max Weber, have described the processes of ‘disenchantment of the world.’ These thinkers assumed that the progressive increase in knowledge would eliminate the influence of religion in the life of modern societies and establish the rule of reason. While the importance of religion as the supreme instance for explaining the world has definitely dwindled, it is difficult today to talk of science holding the dominant position (at least not in the sense of general trust in scientists and experts) (Aupers 2012: 25).

Stef Aupers derives features of today’s culture of universal doubt from the main logic of modern development processes. As he and Stephen Toulmin argue, scepticism has for several centuries been modernization’s hidden programme. The logic of doubt has discredited established scientific knowledge and with time has become the basic rule for popular beliefs and one of the main principles governing media messages. For years, media outlets—even established ones—have instilled an attitude of doubt and a sense of deep uncertainty in the ‘man in the street.’ On the one hand, the media has perfected the method of questioning any news from the world of science by juxtaposing it with contrasting opinions, while on the other, journalists themselves regularly compromise established communication channels by spreading moral panic, fuelling the rhetoric of fear, publicizing unreliable sources, and fabricating news (van Zoonen 2012: 59).

Modern media—especially the internet—has made scientific doubt available to a wider audience, but it is highly uncertain whether such doubt can be a reliable method of judging complex questions: for example, medical issues and the related dilemmas (Aupers 2012: 26). The erosion of trust in science and scientists discourages today’s citizens from actively producing alternative content to the message of mainstream institutions. Most often the mediatized expert knowledge (associated with traditional authorities) is discredited and convictions based on personal experience are enjoined (van Zoonen 2012: 62). The authenticity of common-sense practice and ordinary habits has become fetishized. Personal statements confirming a ‘knowledge of life’ can challenge the findings of the most recognized scholars. Traditional holders of scientific knowledge (for example, medical knowledge) can no longer count on having their authority undisputed. For ‘knowledge-oversaturated’ citizens, these traditional authorities are often considered to be unreliable or to represent just one point of view—which may indeed be taken into account, but which can also be challenged on the basis of their own or other people’s beliefs.

It is worth noting that the development of perspective that placed the independent self in the centre has been supported by grassroots emancipation movements for years. As in the well-known essay by Carol Hanisch, ‘The Personal is Political’ (1970), these movements pushed their conviction of the ideological importance of the individual perspective. Today’s scholars point to the unforeseen consequences of the strategies used by progressive women’s movements, civil rights activists, and LGBT activists. These groups demanded that the individual experiences of women and other discriminated groups (which for years have tried to make their situation a subject of consideration) should be validated in the public discourse. The next step was to develop an alternative perspective based on the personal experience of women, gays, and ethnic minorities. Emancipation, understanding, and the empowerment of marginalized groups involved supporting distinctive points of view and promoting knowledge shaped in specific social conditions and strongly associated with a separate, previously excluded, voice (van Zoonen 2012: 61).

The importance of social movements in granting the individual self a fundamental reference point can be found also in the concept of the ‘the tyranny of intimacy’ by Eva Illouz (2008). Illouz stresses the difference between the intended objectives and unintended consequences of emancipatory movements (including feminism), which are partly responsible for today’s cult of authenticity and self-centred self-determination (Illouz 2007: 102–103). Although emancipatory social movements liberated individuals from many oppressive discourses and practices, they also convinced individuals of the exaggerated importance of private—even selfish—needs and the significance of individual autonomy. Today, these critical concepts turn out to be uncritical in regard to the social implications of previous assumptions. Emancipatory movements have argued for years that we can resolve the most difficult dilemmas of our lives by relying on the forces of intellect and the voice of our inner emotions. Modern man is convinced that autonomy can be created from individual competencies and that on their basis he can build not only a personal identity but also a thorough knowledge of the world.

It is worth noting that the ‘tyranny of intimacy’ is also discussed by Richard Sennett (1977). Unlike Eva Illouz, Sennett considers that preoccupation with the needs of one’s own self is not connected with the public involvement of social activists validating the voice of previously excluded groups. On the contrary, Sennett is interested in the erosion of interest in public affairs and the reluctance of the modern citizen to be concerned about matters that do not relate directly to his individual interests. We could say that the privacy of a *bourgeois*, locked within the walls of his own house, tyrannizes the public sphere. The matters defined as important are primarily personal. Man who is preoccupied only with himself loses interest in issues that may be important not only for him but also for the community or group whose member he is.²

The importance of the personal perspective, which is the foundation of the popularization of knowledge, has not only been promoted by activists of new social movements. It has appeared in part due to the widespread adoption of psychological knowledge and therapeutic culture, which has been developing for decades and is identified by some scholars as a modern variation of the culture of narcissism (Lash 1979, Rosen 2007). Psychologists, coaches, mentors, support groups, and alternative therapies have convinced contemporary people of the salutary role of introspection and constant self-analysis. In time, this attitude has grown into a commitment to continuous self-exploration, self-expression, and self-correction. The key to solving personal problems today is primarily ‘to work on oneself.’ Continuing self-evaluation has combined with the implementation of ‘techniques of self,’ which are constructed using psychological discourses and these—as Foucault wrote—‘permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality’ (Foucault 1988: 18). Autonomy, responsibility, and self-regulation have been linked with liberal values, including the ideology of individualism as one of the flywheels of a neoliberal economy. It has become a duty to preserve as large an indepen-

² For an overview of how the concept ‘tyranny of intimacy’ has been used in the works by Eva Illouz and Richard Sennett, see Maciej Musiał (2013).

dence from state institutions as possible, a rule to evade obligations to the community, and one of the main commandments to have an unshakeable belief in one's own abilities.

The development of psychotherapy has strengthened the modern self in the conviction of the uniqueness of individual biography. There has been a levelling and democratization of biographies. Today every biographical account is considered worth telling and submitted to the judgment of a therapist. There are no better and worse histories; experts argue that any story can be a help or warning to others. The cultural forms that are meant to bring the personal perspective closer to the public are also democratized. The book market has seen the enormous success not only of biographies of famous people and media celebrities, but also of descriptions of the life of 'ordinary people' (patients recovering from a serious illness, for instance) who can become heroes of the collective imagination overnight. Talk shows discuss the problems of the average Joe, while other formats offer him a pop version of therapy. The ideal place to 'express oneself' is in blogs and profiles on social media. Despite the public nature of these media, they are dominated by—as van Zoonen puts it—the authoritarianism of singularity.

It might be expected that populization, which originates from the discourse of modernization, would contribute primarily to the optimistic vision of development associated with sharing knowledge. This happens, however, only to a small extent: for instance, when people share their works within the public channels of communication, launch alternative educational projects, or organize civil think tanks and hybrids of art and business. Often, however, populization takes forms defined by opponents as 'reactionary,' questioning the progressive rhetoric of civilized elites, and raising doubts about public development policies. The populization of knowledge rooted in the attitude of modernization—another paradox—generates movements considered by the 'enlightened' elites to be counter-modernizing. Anti-vaccination movements (the formal or informal associations distrustful of prevention programs) are one example.

The groups treated by their opponents as 'reactionary' are not homogeneous. Their opinions are located along a continuum, where we find positions to which 'sense,' 'rationality,' and action sanctioned under the rule of law can be attributed, as well as those directly associated with conspiracy theories. It is interesting that in the modern forms of populization that verge on conspiracy theories, the mysterious forces driving the world have been located within the institutions of modern society. Entities traditionally identified with concealing the truth from the public and acting to its detriment (Jews, communists) have been replaced by international corporations, business organizations, the European Union, and the International Monetary Fund. Stef Aupers even speaks about 'rational enchantment' in a—seemingly—completely 'disenchanted' world (Aupers 2012: 30). The formation of beliefs verging on conspiracy theories is facilitated by the now ubiquitous discourse of existential uncertainty and the rhetoric of fear disseminated in the media (most recently in regard to the Ebola epidemic in West Africa). The sense of individual and collective concern is enhanced both by recognized sociologists (such as Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens analyzing the risks typical of 'risk society') and by populist 'fear entrepreneurs' (Frank Furedi's term), who use the climate of doubt for primarily instrumental purposes (i.e., to gain political capital). Various societies—like Polish society after the presidential plane crash in 2010—painfully experience this in a situation of collective tragedy: con-

struction accidents and air crashes, nuclear power plant failures, or epidemics of dangerous diseases.

Summary

The intensive processes of disseminating knowledge observed today mean that there is a broadening pluralism of ‘voices’ with pretensions to the truth and redefining scientific criteria. A relatively new phenomenon is the increasing social importance of knowledge that lacks the status of scientific knowledge—beliefs formed on the basis of personal experience and individually constructed rules. The populization of knowledge, paradoxically, grows out of an attitude typical of modernity, one of doubt and scepticism. This attitude has been successfully adopted, processed, and trivialized by the modern ‘man in the street.’ It could be said that populization is also the result of the assimilation of ideas developed as part of emancipatory social movements and by the founders of modern therapy culture.

Simultaneously, in the current institutional and media conditions, the presence of various forms of disseminating knowledge becomes understandable in itself, and its legitimacy no longer requires justification. The universal obligation faced by today’s researchers is to publicize the results of research outside the strictly academic context, including the presentation of scientific achievements in the media, at science festivals, or through the activity of institutional outlets specially designed for this purpose (such as promotional centres, popular publications, departments for contacts with the media, and universities of the ‘third age’). Furthermore, the crises in expert explanations, the politicization of attempts to formulate reliable diagnoses, and polarized disputes involving experts who confirm divergent analyzes, have led to interpretative chaos and inconclusive discussions on issues publicly defined as important. Consequently, conjecture and even the most daring speculation has the same chance of gaining the public’s attention as the findings of state committees, scientific institutions, or recognized research centres.

For an observer of the public sphere, this raises serious questions. Are all voices equally valid, and should they be treated in the same way by researchers? How can science’s declining authority be opposed? Is the myth of universal competence and ‘*I*-pistemology’ a threat that must be fought? How is grassroots knowledge used by the media and politics (for example, by tabloids and right- or left-wing populism claiming to represent the interest of ‘ordinary people’)? Is the development of naive anti-authoritarian concepts associated with the idea of grassroots democracy or participatory populism a real alternative? Such questions should encourage the study of these, so far unresolved, issues.

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