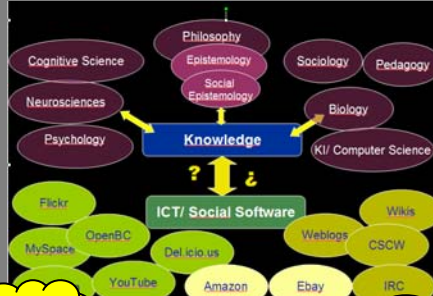


Judith Simon (University of Vienna/Stanford University)

Knowledge is a complex phenomenon, which can be approximated from many different disciplines. In the focus of this poster are approaches within **social epistemology** as the field of philosophy inquiring the social dimensions of knowledge.

Knowledge and related cognitive processes are situated within specific environments. When these environments change, changes in knowledge and cognition are to be expected as well.



Currently our epistemic environment is changing profoundly due to so-called **software/knowledge technologies**. A glut of these new ICT is launched every month. One of their commonalities is their emphasis on communities and related concepts of sociality for the evaluation of information and knowledge construction.

These changes in our epistemic practices have to be accounted for, if epistemology wants to maintain relevance.

How central exactly is the community for knowledge?

To what extent is knowledge social?

Is the community only a means for sharing and distributing knowledge?

Or is the community essential for the construction of knowledge, in fact for conceptualizing knowledge itself?

How social is knowledge? Two exemplary lines of thought in social epistemology

Social epistemology aims at understanding the social dimensions of knowledge. However, what is meant by sociality as well as the degree to which our knowledge is social varies strongly between different theories of social epistemology.

Knowledge as a social status and its dependence on epistemic communities:
Martin Kusch (2002): "Knowledge by agreement"
„knowledge“, „to know“, etc mark **social states**

- the social status 'knowledge' is typically granted to *groups* of people
- community is primary subject of knowledge, there is **no isolated knower**
- knowledge depends on **epistemic communities** bound to each other by entitlements and commitments
- testimony** is only one of the social aspects of knowledge and it is not just knowledge transmission, but a generative source of knowledge
- knowledge is local: membership in the same groups matters to the interaction of epistemic agents

►►► Kusch's account offers a thorough analysis of the sociality of knowledge. But what normative conclusions can we draw from his analyses?

Knowledge as justified true belief and how to achieve it by applying stochastics:
Alvin Goldman (1999): "Knowledge in a social world"

- knowledge = justified true belief
- goal of epistemology: identify practices that raise **veristic value**, i.e. lead to more justified true belief
- there are individual and social ways to enhance knowledge, social epistemology is complementary to individual epistemology
- Bayesian inferences are the best epistemic practice on average** to assess **testimony** in different reporting environments,

►►► Goldman gives clear recommendations for epistemic practices, which can also be implemented into software. However, his „social“ epistemology is based on the *individual* exercise of stochastic calculations. It is social only to the extent that it allows for testimonial evidence to be used for reasoning and for being applicable to social situations (e.g. in law, education, politics, etc).

Is it possible to combine insights from these two approaches to advance our epistemic practices? And could this process further be supported by the use of social software/knowledge technologies?

How can epistemology account for changing epistemic practices without abandoning normativity?

Is it possible to fruitfully combine normative recommendations from different epistemological approaches?

Can social software be of any help for this pooling? How?

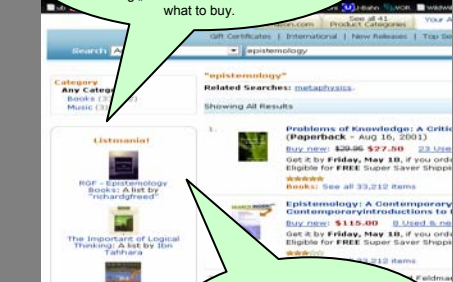
How can we ensure objectivity if knowledge depends on communities?

Can we turn over some of our epistemic duties to software applications? Which ones & how?

„Twine, a new service that gives users a smarter way to share, organize, and find information with people they **trust**.“
„Twine helps you better leverage and contribute to the **collective intelligence** of your network.“
www.twine.com/about

An analysis of recent developments of **social software/knowledge technologies** reveals that socio-epistemological accounts on procedures that yield knowledge are already **inscribed into these technologies**. Social software applications merge the different procedures of knowledge construction and relate them to each other. Thus, they might be an effective means for **combining and testing epistemologies**.

Another important technology labeled **social software** are **recommender systems**, which are employed at eBay and Amazon.com for instance. Here the community is used for calculating „**social**“ recommendations about what to buy.



„del.icio.us is a **social bookmarking website** -- the primary use of del.icio.us is to store your bookmarks online[...].“
"You can also use del.icio.us to see the interesting links that your friends and other people bookmark, and **share links** with them in return. You can even browse and search del.icio.us to discover the cool and useful bookmarks that everyone else has saved -- which is made easy with tags.“ (www.del.icio.us/about)

Tags
On del.icio.us you are offered **popular tags** and **recommended tags**: The recommended tags are based on your former tags, the popular one on the whole del.icio.us-community -- both are calculated statistically.

However, these recommender systems do not work well for new users. To improve performance, **trust-aware recommender systems** (eg. Massa & Bhattacharjee 2004) have been developed, which exploit social networks and trust relationships between users.

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Conclusions

Taking into account the pervasiveness of ICT and its importance for scientific as well as other forms of reasoning, it should be evident that a thorough analysis of these technological developments should be of vital interest for understanding knowledge and the processes involved in its construction. So far epistemologists have been hesitant to consider changes in our epistemic environment caused by ICT. However, if epistemology wants to remain relevant, it has to account for our actual epistemic practices, which nowadays for the most part involve ICT. Moreover, since many social software/ knowledge technologies combine procedures of stochastic information aggregation with functions enabling and fostering interactive and communicative processes in (epistemic) communities, they might help to settle epistemological disputes. Not only can insights from different epistemological theories be combined, their recommendations might also be tested for their usefulness in supporting the distribution and construction of knowledge.

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