

Biopolitics and the Presentation of the Self in the Internet: Discourse Analysis of an Online Platform

Abstract for "The 'Governmediality' of Work, Welfare, and the Life Course: Regulating Lives in the Knowledge Society". Workshop at the Hanse Institute for Advanced Study Delmenhorst, Germany, 7 – 8 December 2006

Anne Waldschmidt, Anne Klein, Miguel Tamayo Korte, Sibel Dalman-Eken

Practices such as prenatal and preimplantation diagnostics, artificial insemination, stem-cell research and production of transgenetic laboratory animals, along with dreams of human "clones", challenge basic assumptions about the subject and about society, and they blur certain boundaries that we take for granted – such as those between human beings and animals. The emerging ways in which "anthropotechniques" are being used and presented are the result of scientific and economic interests, pragmatic considerations and varying degrees of public acceptance, and they mark changes in ethical and religious values and sociocultural norms. Basic concepts such as the subject, the inviolability of human life, equality and autonomy, which can be traced back to antiquity and which provide the foundations for modern society, are being challenged in new ways by "liberal eugenics" (Jürgen Habermas). In addition, traditional understandings of the human body, and the identity-relevant concept that one's own body is a stable unit, are being shaken. The "alliance dispositive" (Michel Foucault) of the family, which is based on blood relations and gender differences, is losing its validity. Persons with handicaps and chronically ill people are seeing themselves confronted with new challenges, hopes and discrimination.

Although it is clear that the new "biopolitics" (Michel Foucault) is already having a central impact on everyday actions and biographies, and is creating new requirements relative to identity concepts and self-management, the ongoing debate continues to be dominated by experts and stakeholders. Discussion and deliberation are taking place in numerous institutionalised bodies and are routinely presented to society via the mass media. By contrast, ordinary people who wish to participate in the discourse are limited to appearing as "unusual cases" in the mass media, to taking part in "town-meeting" discussions or to sharing their knowledge, opinions and attitudes via surveys (which are usually standardised). In other words, special discourses such as that of the life sciences, and elaborated interdiscourses such as those of the mass media, politics, literature and art, dominate the discourse topic "bioethics", while non-hegemonial interdiscourses (such as discourses of sub-cultures and counter-discourses of social movements) and "what the people are saying" (Michel Foucault) attract little notice.

In October 2002, *Aktion Mensch*, a private charitable organisation, established the internet forum www.1000fragen.de and carried out a supporting media campaign that invited the public to enter into society's debate on bioethics and biopolitics. In terms of discourse theory, with this action the organisation was seeking to restore an "event nature" (Michel Foucault) in the relevant social discourse. Forum visitors were asked to participate by formulating their own questions and commenting on contributions of other visitors. This participatory discourse project, which was innovative in terms of its concept and reach, and which made effective use of the possibilities of virtual communications, met

with an astounding response: As of September 2005, some 12,000 questions and over 50,000 comments had been submitted, and the Web site had received over 1.5 million "hits".

Our research project, which is being funded by the overall project sponsor, is studying this online platform with the instruments of quantitative and qualitative social research. We are looking at this internet forum as a discursive event, in civil society's interdiscourse, that focuses on bioethics as its discourse topic and that is strongly oriented to everyday knowledge. The forum material provides a unique body of data that is eminently suited for gaining insights into processes of everyday (self-) communication. In our presentation, we wish to concentrate on the following knowledge-sociological questions, on the basis of the empirical data:

- What knowledge about biotechnological capabilities is articulated by non-experts? How are specialized knowledge, media-communicated knowledge and everyday knowledge linked with each other?
- What concepts of the subject, and what perceptions of humanness, are circulating in cyberspace? How are identity management, self-presentation and self-regulation (in short: self-government) being redesigned in the face of diffusion of traditional differentiations between nature and culture?
- How does biotechnological knowledge influence traditional values and norms of social action (for example, in critical situations of human life or in dealing with normality and deviance)? Does such knowledge stimulate reformulation of values and norms?
- What models and utopias of social coexistence are being designed in response to the challenges arising from biopolitics, and especially in response to everyday pressures for action?

The discourse order filtered out to date indicates that while the discourse event does reflect a simplified version of the pertinent special discourse, it has also produced a broad range of new subjects and concepts and thus has treated central issues of social coexistence, as well as old and new "perceptions of humanness", in unconventional ways. Findings to date also show that power games between competing discursive formations do lend themselves to empirical study. Furthermore, practices involving "extremely intensive subjectivation of knowledge" (Jürgen Link) are apparent. For this reason, the lecture will focus especially on the relationship between special knowledge (of the medical, biological, and life sciences) and subjective knowledge from experience, a knowledge that derives from direct confrontation with biotechnological and genetic-engineering innovation in everyday life and, often, from connections with existential areas and episodes of human life.

Contact:

Prof. Dr. rer. pol. Anne Waldschmidt
Universität zu Köln, Soziologie in der Heilpädagogik, Sozialpolitik und Sozialmanagement
Frangenheimstr. 4, D-50931 Köln
Tel. 00-49-221-470 6890, Fax 00-49-221-470 7794
E-mail anne.waldschmidt@uni-koeln.de
Research project "1000 Fragen zur Bioethik" ("1000 questions about bioethics"): <http://www.hrf.uni-koeln.de/bioethik.php>