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John Dewey's Philosophical Legacy for the Global Access to Knowledge Movement in the Digital Age

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Introduction

In *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey stated that “the prime difficulty [...] is that of discovering the means by which a scattered, mobile and manifold public may so recognize itself as to define and express its interests” (*LW* 2: 327) and that the only possible solution for this problem lies in “the perfecting of the means and ways of communication of meanings” (332).

Today, the Internet has massively changed our means of communication, particularly in the last decade. This change deeply affects not only economics, politics, science, and media, but it has a high impact on our social behavior and everyday life as well.

While the relevance of Dewey's philosophy for the 21st century has been discussed in several recent volumes,¹ very little has been written yet about the relationship between Dewey's ideas and the digital age.²

To explore this relationship, I would like to shift the attention from “the” Internet in general to the *Access to knowledge* (A2K) movement in particular. The A2K movement might not represent the so-called ‘digital mainstream,’ but it

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1 Gavin (2003); Garrison (2008); Rud/Garrison/Stone (2009); Shook/Kurtz (2011); Waks (2013); Garrison/Hickman/Ikeda (2014).

2 Rare exceptions are the article “Public Life, John Dewey, and Media Technology” by Hans Lenk and Ulrich Arnsward (2015), Craig Cunningham's (2009: 44–48) remarks on the technological development in education, and Nathan Crick's (2009) article on Lippmann and Dewey in the digital age.

certainly has a significant importance, because it can be identified as one of the most promising and progressive movements in the new era of digital culture.

In contrast to the obvious contradiction between Dewey's vision of democracy and most of today's politics and economy, the examination of the A2K movement reveals a stunning similarity to Dewey's philosophical approach. In this regard, I will argue that the digital age might be a fertile ground for the revitalization of Dewey's philosophy.

The paper is divided into three main parts. I will first give a short illustration of the A2K movement and its origins. Second, I will outline some of the guiding principles and values of the A2K movement. In the third part, I will turn to Dewey's vision of creative democracy as an exemplification, in order to show how his philosophical framework is related to the principles of the A2K movement. Finally, I will present my conclusion and give a brief outlook.

1. What is the A2K movement?

The term “Access to Knowledge” (A2K) is used since 2004 as an umbrella for a coalition of a wide range of diverse movements and activities.³ It is certainly not a social movement in a narrower sense, not an identity-based movement and not a protest-movement. It rather contains of heterogeneous activities of individual activists, civil society groups, scientific communities, corporations, public institutions, and government agencies. What they have in common is a critical account on intellectual property rights, such as patents, copyrights, and trademarks. They emphasize the importance of information policy and its consequences to a

3 Kapczynski (2010); Krikorian (2010); Noronha/Malcolm (2010).

wide range of human values and claim a “public access to the products of human culture and learning.” (Noronha/Malcolm 2010: 2)

The emergence of the A2K movement, following Benkler (2010: 223), must be seen in the context of four long-term intellectual and material-historical trends: 1. the rise of the global trading system, 2. the rise of the knowledge economy, 3. the subsequent development of a networked information society, and 4. the rise of individual human rights. Although the movement is closely linked with digital culture, it is concerned with classical problems of social justice and inequalities in the distribution of resources in the knowledge economy (cf. Krikorian 2010: 74).

The claim for ‘access’ is originally taken from the international campaign for access to essential medicines in developing countries, which was started in 1999 by Doctors Without Borders. This campaign is one of the main roots of the A2K movement. Before, in 1998, the South African government was sued by the 39 largest pharmaceutical manufacturers for buying drugs against the outbreak of HIV/AIDS not from official suppliers, but generic versions from third party vendors in India and Brazil (cf. Stalder 2010: 320). U.S. and EU governments supported the lawsuit against South Africa, which provoked public outrage followed by the international campaign for access to essential medicines. Fortunately, the lawsuit was withdrawn in 2001.

In addition to the protests against restrictive patent laws for pharmaceutical products, the critical examination of intellectual property rights has been intensified by numerous movements, organizations, and consumer groups in various fields, especially with regard to Internet regulation policies.⁴

4 Remarkable international protests in 2011 were directed against the “Stop Online Privacy Act” (SOPA) and the “PROTECT IP Act” (PIPA) in the U.S.

A second important root of the A2K movement is the *free-software movement*, founded by Richard Stallman in 1983. Its principles were defined in the *Free Software Definition* which became an essential influence for subsequent movements.

To promote free software beyond the hacker community, the *Open Source Initiative* was established in 1998 by means of which the term “open source” has become very popular within a short time. Since then, a whole number of movements and initiatives emerged, applying the principles of free and open-source software to other fields which even lead to an inflationary use of the term ‘open.’ Nevertheless, many of the countless ‘open movements’ became exceedingly significant, e. g. open access, open data, open government, or open science, just to mention a few.

A third important subgroup, that I would like to mention, is the *commons movement* which has its roots in the cooperative movement and in the ecological movement. It received extensive public attention in 2009, when Elinor Ostrom became the first woman who received the Nobel Prize in Economics for her research on the commons. The commons movement was originally focused on exhaustible natural resources that are collectively owned and used, but in the recent decade, the commons movement was extended to immaterial goods, called ‘knowledge commons,’ which have *information* or *data* as their resource and can therefore be replicated without a loss of quality or quantity.

The production and utilization of knowledge commons became widespread in the Internet, furthered by the countless tools to collaborate, share, remix, and distribute cultural works, as well as the increased use of free licenses to abolish copyright restrictions. The best known knowledge common is probably *Wikipedia*,

others are free software, such as *Linux* and the Internet browser *Firefox*, or, in education, the growing amount of *Open Educational Resources*. These examples illustrate that the denomination as a *common* does not only refer to a product, but includes the entire process of collective production, usage and management.

2. Principles and values of the A2K movement

It has already become obvious how closely the various roots and movements are intertwined. They share a set of guiding principles, concepts, and values which I will outline in the following. In order to avoid the accusation of just interpreting the A2K movement through a Deweyan lens and thereby constructing a circular argument, I will primarily refer to self descriptions and central documents of the movement.

Some main principles of the A2K movement can be traced back to the *Free Software Definition*. Its modern version includes four essential freedoms that the license agreement of a computer program must grant to be counted as free software: the freedom 0. to *run* the software for any purpose, 1. to *study* its source code and to *change* it, 2. to *distribute* copies of the program, and 3. to *distribute modified versions* of the program.⁵

Stallman explicitly refers with each of the four freedoms to a *positive* concept of liberty that enables individuals to act and to cooperate. The term ‘free’ in ‘free software’ does not only imply that the software is free of charge. As Stallman always puts it, “you should think of ‘free’ as in ‘free speech,’ not as in ‘free beer’.”

5 The *Free Software Definition*: <https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-sw.html>.

According to Stallman the four freedoms do not only represent an effective method of developing software in collaboration, moreover, they include an ethical claim, because they “promote social solidarity—that is, *sharing* and *cooperation*.”⁶

The principle of *sharing* is realized through the permission of the unrestricted distribution of copies both of the original and the modified version of a program. With regard to software, it is not only source code that is shared, but creative work, improvements, tools, skills, data, and knowledge.

The principle of *cooperation* is realized by the possibility of access to the source code, which is a precondition for studying how the program works, for its modification, and thereby for the joint development of software in a community of software engineers. In this way, individual software engineers can contribute by sharing their improvements, from which the whole user community benefits.

Even though *openness* is perceived as the central principle of the ‘open movements,’ Stallman claims that it is not a value by itself, but must be understood in relation to cooperation and freedom. He suspects that the popular use of the term ‘open’ overshadows the principles of freedom.⁷ This concern led to a long-lasting debate about whether to use the term ‘open,’ ‘free’ or even the French/Spanish ‘libre’ which finally resulted in the now common, but circumstantial, designation “free/libre open-source software” (FLOSS) as a compromise.

Nevertheless, most of the open movements have adopted the principles of *sharing* and *cooperation* from the free-software movement, even if they strongly refer to the concept of openness. Basically, the meaning of openness varies in the different movements. In the *open data movement*, for example, openness is

6 <https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/open-source-misses-the-point.html> (italics added, A.A.).

7 <https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/open-source-misses-the-point.html>.

understood as threefold: as legal openness (unrestricted use, modification, and redistribution), technical openness (availability and access), and social openness (universal participation).⁸ Since the ideal of openness, in its legal, technical, and social dimension, aims to the higher goal of cooperation, openness can be considered, following Stallman's line of argument, as a condition for cooperation.

Last but not least, I would like to mention that the A2K movement rejects ideological and dualistic thinking, for what Bollier/Weston (2014) have pointed out for the commons movement, applies to the greater A2K movement as well: Hence, it “is not a traditional movement defined by an ideology or policy agenda. It is united, rather, by its participants’ commitment to certain social practices and principles of self-governance.” For Benkler (2010: 233–35), the A2K movement could even overcome the traditional right-left divide and therefore “become the basis of a new political alignment.”

According to Gaëlle Krikorian (2010: 72–3) most activists in the A2K movement are neither radical nor interested in dialectal logic of opposition to *the* public, *the* state or *the* industry as a whole. They do not want to establish confrontational “counterpublics,” but instead try “to formulate a debate outside of the dialectic of opposition.” In particular, the A2K movement is inherently pluralistic and “seeks to increase awareness of the various problems and various needs of specific groups.” It is based “on the effort to convince others that they are affected, should be concerned, and should act accordingly.” — That sounds like a realization of Dewey's concept of the public.

8 According to the *Open Definition* (<http://opendefinition.org/od/>) and the *Open Data Handbook* (<http://opendatahandbook.org/>), which has been both published by the non-profit organization “Open Knowledge” (<https://okfn.org/>).

3. Dewey's relation to the principles of the A2K movement

For someone who is familiar with Dewey's work, the wide range of similarities between the mentioned principles of the A2K movement and the key themes of Dewey's philosophy have already become obvious. The presented principles offer a range of interesting points that could be reflected from a Deweyan perspective. Considering the limited time, I will focus on the principle of cooperation which is essential, both for the A2K movement and for Dewey. For this purpose, I will take a brief look at Dewey's vision of creative democracy, which includes many central topics of Dewey's thinking in a condensed form and reveals the importance of cooperation for his philosophy.

In his essay "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us" (1939, *LW* 14), Dewey states that democracy has to be continuously re-created in the light of contemporary conditions and that this task "can be accomplished only by inventive effort and creative activity." He claims that we have "to get rid of the habit of thinking of democracy as something institutional and external," since it is not a "perpetual motion machine" but "a personal, an individual, way of life."

Democracy as a way of life, the very central idea in Dewey's entire works, is characterized by three democratic beliefs or faiths: First, the "democratic faith in human equality," or, in other words, "a working faith in the possibilities of human nature [...] as that nature is exhibited in every human being irrespective of race, color, sex, birth and family, of material or cultural wealth." (226) The second refers to the ability of reflective thinking as a necessary condition for the functioning of a democratic society, namely the "faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished." (227) And third, the *faith in cooperation* with others which overcomes differences without

neglecting them. That means “that even when needs and ends or consequences are different for each individual, the habit of amicable cooperation—which may include, as in sport, rivalry and competition—is itself a priceless addition to life.” (228)

Dewey explicates that “to cooperate by giving differences a chance to show themselves because of the belief that the expression of difference is not only a right of the other persons but is a means of enriching one's own life-experience, is inherent in the democratic personal way of life.” (228)

This demonstrates that Dewey's understanding of democracy as a way of life is based on a sophisticated concept of social cooperation, which is closely linked to the ethical dimensions of tolerance, peace, and diversity. That goes far beyond the principle of cooperation according to the *Free Software Definition*. The connection of cooperation and democracy in its ethical dimension would be a great benefit for the A2K movement.

It must be noticed that Dewey rejected all kinds of dualistic oppositions that have shaped the history of philosophy. Furthermore, just as the A2K movement, he rejected any kind of foundational and dogmatic thinking. Instead, he argued for the use flexible categories and context-sensitive inquiry. He pointed out that inquiry related to social matters should always start with actual activities and problems, not with general concepts, such as ‘the’ state, ‘the’ society, or ‘the’ public, because those concepts draw us “imperceptibly into a consideration of the logical relationship of various ideas to one another, and away from facts of human activity.” (*LW* 2: 241)

Starting the process of social inquiry from human activity, Dewey's pragmatist approach is able to overcome traditionally opposing ideologies. His own political

philosophy already represents a seminal connection of liberalism and socialism, he even identified himself as a “democratic socialist” (Westbrook 1990: 429). While Dewey's undogmatic, open-minded approach has been a bar to a broad reception of his work during the Cold War, it provides a necessarily required way of thinking in the post-socialist and post-colonial world of the 21st century, in which many traditional dualisms need to be overcome.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to explore the relationship between Dewey's philosophy and the digital age. Therefore, I have focused on the A2K movement as an important example. I have outlined the central principles and values of the A2K movement, which is characterized by a positive concept of freedom, a commitment to the principles of sharing, cooperation, and openness, as well as the rejection of ideological and dualistic thinking. The brief examination of Dewey's concept of creative democracy has shown that he has much to offer to the A2K movement. Starting from the same point—the importance of social cooperation—Dewey uncovers and stresses aspects of cooperation, that are overlooked in the A2K movement, especially the democratic and ethical dimension. In this sense, Dewey's philosophy provides a valuable legacy for the A2K movement, which could support its aims.

Furthermore, I have only focused on the principle of cooperation, but there is much more left to discover. I am fully aware that this brief overview has slightly scratched on the surface of what Dewey's approach has to offer for the A2K movement. One need only to think of Dewey's theory of knowledge, his theory of

social inquiry, or his theory of the public. Obviously, much more research is needed to apply Dewey's philosophy to the actual conditions of the digital age.

On the other hand, the Deweyan approach can be improved by the A2K movement, too. Although Dewey, as Richard Bernstein (2010: 87) has criticized, “always emphasized the need for fundamental economic changes in furthering the realization of radical democracy, he never indicated in detail what these should be.” This gap could be probably filled by the approach of Commons-based peer-production (developed by Benkler 2005; 2011), which can be considered as a part of the A2K movement. It is based on the dynamics of cooperation and on the rejection of the idea that all humans are fundamentally selfish beings.

Since the A2K movement is still in an initial phase, it cannot be told how it will develop in the coming years. At least, by showing the potential for a revitalization of Dewey's philosophy in the digital age, I hope to stimulate further discussion and collaboration. Those who are inspired by Dewey's vision of creative democracy, should engage with the aims of the A2K movement, because the issue of intellectual property is a crucial condition for the freedom of communication, the exchange of ideas, facts, and experiences, all of which is essential for Dewey's approach.

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