

Circulating Knowledge for the 21st Century: Jan Surman's Interview with Johan Östling

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Jan Surman: Thank you for agreeing to the interview. My first question is a very general one. Recent years have seen the rapid growth of the history of knowledge and circulation of knowledge coming from different disciplines and sub-disciplines.¹ Could you briefly sketch your take on the history of knowledge and the history of knowledge in circulation?

Johan Östling: I would like to start by telling you my own story. I am trained neither as a historian of science nor a historian of humanities, but as a historian of modern Europe, and I have been very much shaped by the cultural and linguistic turns that occurred during the 1990s and subsequent years. Throughout my career, I have been working on 20th-century European history. As my main postdoctoral project, I began working on German intellectual history and, in particular, the Humboldtian tradition and university history. I spent a year in Berlin, including a stint at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science. This was back in 2014, and it was a very inspiring time. I met, of course, many excellent historians of science dealing with this field but I also felt, coming from the field of general history, that many studies were very detailed and mainly examining science and the institutions of science rather than the importance of science in a broader, more societal, sense. Sometimes society at large or the social, political, cultural, or economic contexts were missing. I was thinking about these circumstances and discussing the issue with a Norwegian colleague, Erling Sandmo, who was also at the Institute in Berlin at that time. We were both historians and we were thinking about, or reflecting on, how to write a somewhat broader history – a history of knowledge that could also be a history that comprised larger cultural and societal phenomena. When we went back to Scandinavia, we decided to try doing just that. We were inspired by the ongoing German discussion on *Wissensgeschichte* – the history of knowledge – which is broader than *Wissenschaftsgeschichte* – history of science. There had been discussions in Berlin, but perhaps even more so in Zurich at the *Zentrum Geschichte des Wissens*, and we were inspired by these ideas and brought them back to Scandinavia and gradually tried to introduce and launch this kind of history of knowledge, mainly written from the point of view of the discipline of history. For us, it was a way of developing cultural history, or a cultural historical approach, but focusing on knowledge. We started by gathering young scholars, mainly postdoctoral scholars, and with them we began reading quite a lot, and we also gradually launched various research projects. The first project in which we really felt that we could intervene and contribute

¹ See two new journals for the history of knowledge, *Journal for the History of Knowledge* (est. 2020) and *KNOW: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge* (est. 2017), and the Special Issue of *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* (vol. 43, issue 2-3) 2019 entitled *History of Science or History of Knowledge?*

to the international conversation concerned the circulation of knowledge. At that time, this was a popular theme in many branches or sub-disciplines of history, not least, of course, in the global history of science, but also in other fields, but we thought that we could make a contribution here and bring some clarity to the topic. So we arranged a workshop with Nordic scholars and had a fruitful, open conversation which opened up new vistas of research. Not least importantly, many researchers could relate their own research to the notion of the circulation of knowledge. They came from different fields and studied different periods but they could relate to discussions about the circulation of knowledge. In 2018, we published the edited volume *Circulation of Knowledge*,² in which we tried to introduce the field of the history of knowledge as we understood it. So that was basically how we went through the process of establishing the idea of the history of knowledge.

JS: Could you say a bit more exactly about what you understand by the “circulation of knowledge”? There are so many different definitions currently discussed, for instance by Kapil Raj on the global circulation of knowledge³...

JÖ: You are completely right, that there are many, perhaps too many, different definitions. When we started our project, we realized that this was one of the problems: it was impossible to find a well-defined or well-formulated definition that everybody could really agree on. But basically, I think that what we understood as circulation of knowledge was very close to what James Secord had written about in his seminal 2004 article in *Isis*, formulating it as “knowledge in transit.”⁴ Secord asks what happens when knowledge is moving. Potentially we have a transformation, not only of the content, but also of the form. It is vital to be aware of the circumstance that, when knowledge moves from one domain to another, be it a social domain or a specific literary genre, or a physical place, it potentially transforms. This transformation can be profound or not so profound, but the key interest for us was to study this transformation – or, for that matter, lack of transformation.

JS: From what you say, it seems that both of us have encountered similar problems. When I was working with the concept of translation I struggled to put what was actually happening in my research into words. One has to establish an entity (or entities) which is (are) moving, and then the points of departure and arrival, but you cannot essentialize. So, at the very end we had the semiotic idea of translation, and that translation also constitutes, or creates, places “from” and “to,” and thus the initial context and its final context.

² ÖSTLING, SANDMO, LARSSON HEIDENBLAD, NILSSON HAMMAR, and NORDBERG 2018.

³ RAJ 2007.

⁴ SECORD 2004: 654-72.

I was therefore wondering, does studying circulation create a completely new vocabulary for the historical process? Or does it make us think about new vocabularies that we need to verbalize our theoretical insights? In my experience it does, but at the same time it creates a problem, for we have to bring some stability to the overriding fluidity of the conceptualization that we are actually producing.

JÖ: Definitely. That is also something that I have been working on since we published this book in 2018. Different people, different scholars, have also stressed that it was too big and too fluid, that it could be used as a buzzword meaning almost anything, and that it is also part of a kind of post-modern discourse or a discourse of globalization, which strongly emphasizes the importance of fluidity and a kind of borderless condition. But these scholars – and I am thinking about Kapil Raj, for example, or James Secord, but also about researchers in the Zurich environment – have stressed that it is and it could be used for too many different purposes. I think they are partly right, at least when it comes to circulation. I have been trying to inquire if we can establish some kind of stability, or stable points, where we won't have all this fluidity. One example of that was when I tried to introduce the concept of “arenas of knowledge.”⁵

JS: For some years now, there has been a dialogue between James Secord and Kapil Raj expressly concerning the question of how to define circulation. You said that Secord's 2004 article is one of the starting points for this kind of history of knowledge and circulation. In the last four or five years, he has been touring the world criticizing his initial conceptualization and saying that circulation might be a misleading concept because, first, in a way it implies a circular movement, which is not always the case and, second, because it doesn't do justice to agency of those people who are normally called “recipients.” He is proposing “communication” as a new buzzword instead of “circulation.” Some scholars, including Raj, are talking more about translation than about circulation, while yet others push the concept or “cultural translation.”⁶ Where do you stand in relation to this debate? Because for me there could also be different levels, with circulation being one level, and translation and communication taking place, for instance, at the micro level, at the level of the encounter.

JÖ: I think that it is a good way of seeing it. Circulation for me is not at all a precise scholarly concept. On the contrary, I see it as a kind of general framework, a way of approaching history. Then you need many more detailed and precise concepts in order to study particular processes or contexts. But circulation is a way of opening up historical scholarship to certain perspectives or questions. In that sense I would say that circulation has been productive, but

⁵ ÖSTLING 2020a: 111-126; ÖSTLING 2021: 649-656.

⁶ RAJ 2016: 39-57; KORBEL, and STROBL 2022; POLÓNIA, BRACHT, and CONCEIÇÃO 2018, and many more.

it's not enough to really analyse the more precisely defined historical processes or objects.

I am not sure that “communication” helps us very much, however. It is also a weak and broad concept. It has been discussed in many disciplines, including media studies and communication studies since at least the first half of the 20th century, and it could mean many different things. I am sure, however, that we, as historians, can learn from other disciplines, including media and communication studies, and if that is what Secord is proposing, that we should also read literature from neighbouring fields, I fully agree with him. But I'm not sure that the concept of communication is much better than that of circulation. Also, I would say that for me circulation does not at all mean that the knowledge process comes back to where it started. I see how that could be implied, with the very concept of a circle. But for me it is rather the transformative character of the process that is important, and the concept of circulation in some ways at least tries to capture it.

JS: I strongly agree and I think that one of the issues with the concept of circulation is that we, as non-native speakers of English, might intuitively understand it differently than, for example, Secord.

JÖ: I think so, too. But I also think that Secord is right about the audiences and participatory actors. He very much stressed this in his 2004 article, but also in his 2014 book, *Visions of Science*.⁷ The book deals with Victorian science and inquires how various knowledge actors are part of a larger process – not only scientists, of course, but also readers, journalists, writers, as well as editors and those working in the publishing industry, etc. I think he's right, that there is still much work to be done in order to highlight the various stages in the knowledge processes and the various actors taking part in it. What I have been working on in the last years, the history of humanities, is of course partly a new field and very much driven by Dutch scholars, such as Rens Bod and others, and the new journal *History of Humanities* which is five years old and published by the University of Chicago Press, but also other initiatives. They all have contributed to the invigoration of this history of humanities. It is not only the history of humanities, but a much broader history with a global focus, bringing in the comparative studies and comparing different patterns of knowledge, for example. However, I would say we still lack the ambition to capture larger public knowledge systems, including the public sphere, that is, the question of how the humanities are discussed, read, debated, and become part of a kind of public conversation. That hasn't been very much at the centre of attention of the new enterprise – the history of humanities.⁸

⁷ SECORD 2014.

⁸ However, see the new forum section that I have coedited together with Isak Hammar: ÖSTLING and HAMMAR 2021.

So in that respect I think Secord is right, there is still much work to be done when we are looking outside the academic institutions and into the importance of the humanities for society at large.

JS: We will return to the public conversation in the last question, about how COVID-19 changed the history of knowledge, but before that I have another conceptual question, about the elastic, or elusive, concept of knowledge. We have already mentioned several lines of criticism of the concept of circulation, and I think that one of the issues with the concept is that it was developed with reference to very Western categories of knowledge and science, starting with the history of knowledge being seen, in a way, as an extension of the history of science, and then always referring to the history of science. But when Kapil Raj writes about his history of knowledge in circulation (or entangled knowledge), it is still very much informed by Bruno Latour and the question of the centre of calculation and how science works. And I was wondering about the extent to which the current debate in the history of knowledge in circulation actually grasps the complexity of global entanglements. We still have a very vague concept of knowledge, which is mostly not very well explained, but when it is, it's explained in a way that scholars should understand what it entails. And the question is, if we study the global context or, for instance, the Medieval context – contexts with which we're conceptually not very familiar – does the concept of knowledge still work, or does it have to be substantially changed in order to produce interesting results?

JÖ: Some historians of science who have discussed this issue argued that the history of knowledge could be an alternative to the history of science. For instance, in her 2017 article in the journal *KNOW*, Lorraine Daston argued that “knowledge” is a good alternative to “science” when we speak about global history.⁹ It is not so much tied to the narrative of the rise of Western science and in that sense is more neutral. It can be debated, of course, if it's too big or vague to be analytically productive, but for me it shows its potential partly because of the fact that we have had this discussion. By bringing knowledge into the discussion, we can see it as a kind of invitation to raise this kind of global question – it enables comparisons between different periods, even the Middle Ages, and also geographical comparisons between Europe and other parts of the world. But of course it doesn't solve everything, we still have many problems, not least with what this comparison can bring; are things too distant, are the differences too big in order to really come up with some kind of substantial claim?

At the same time, I think that if we really have an interest in developing a program for the global history of knowledge, we can learn from other disciplines.

⁹ DASTON 2017: 131-154.

Anthropology, for example, or religious studies have concepts like “culture” or “religion” and we should look at how they have been used and debated – and they have been debated at least throughout the 20th century. How do they use these very Eurocentric, or originally European, concepts in order to understand other parts of the world and other periods?

Inspired by these discussions, we can hopefully reflect on how valid and how useful the concept of “knowledge” is for a global framework. In that context, I think it is, as always, important to distinguish between various forms or ways of approaching knowledge. Are we using knowledge as an analytical category that we have defined in the early part of the 21st century to look back at history? Or are we using it as an empirical concept, something that was used during a specific historical period with a specific meaning? Or are we using it as a kind of normative concept? Today, especially if we're looking at contemporary public discourse, my impression is that we use it with all of these understandings at the same time, and that is a bit confusing to say the least.

JS: I think that in the past few years the normative usage of knowledge has grown exponentially and I think that we will come back to it. And, of course, you're right in saying that it also has consequences for the public discourse; maybe even drastic consequences. I also really like the idea that we should engage in a deeper transdisciplinary discussion about the history of knowledge and about knowledge as a category. I often have the feeling that the history of science often postulates that we should have this interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary discussion, but it doesn't really happen as often as it should, and even the institutions which could be leading the way, like the Max-Planck-Institute for the History of Science, are still working on and for the history of science.

JÖ: You're probably right, and that is perhaps also why the history of science, as far as I understand it, is big enough to have its own journals, its own institutes, its own conversations. So it doesn't really have to engage with other fields of historical scholarship. And that is also true for other fields. For example, history of education also has its own journals, its own conferences, its own chairs, its own networks etc., but these two fields, the history of education and history of science, they don't meet as often as they should.

JS: I think the example of the history of books, which is only now entering the conversation with the history of science, is similar. Ironically, this has consequences. For example, in Germany the history of science has been declining in recent decades and I hear historians of science very often complaining that general historians are not listening to what historians of science have to say. And at the same time, I'm very aware that historians of science also do not readily pay attention to what other disciplines, even historical disciplines, are doing.

JÖ: I think this is a kind of compartmentalization which we can see here. I hope that the history of knowledge may serve, as I argued elsewhere,¹⁰ as a kind of integrative field which brings together the history of science, the history of education, the history of the book, media history, intellectual history, cultural history – not everything of course, but it can offer a common arena where these disciplines can meet, under specific conditions, of course.

JS: Since you mentioned the key word “arena,” I would like to continue in this direction. I find your conceptualization of the knowledge arena fascinating and very useful for the conceptualization of both the past and present of science.¹¹ I would like to ask you about one specificity of the arena of knowledge which I find very intriguing, and which I think is something that could be developed in further research, namely the question of temporality differing across various arenas. If I understand your idea of the arena correctly, we have an arena in which knowledge emerges, in which it circulates and then there are different arenas which are in contact with each other, and concepts can circulate between them. Since arena is a very medial thing, then it would also mean that the speed at which knowledge is validated, or at with which knowledge travels or acquires certain characteristics will be very arena-specific. In every society, we have different knowledge arenas with very different speeds at which knowledge is validated or certified. So how does it actually affect knowledge itself? In one example that I worked on, I was looking at the late 19th-century psychologist and psychic researcher Julian Ochorowicz, who was conducting experiments on the Naples medium Eusapia Palladino.¹² Over several months he organized regular sittings with Palladino in Warsaw, under differing circumstances, so that he could make scientific observations under controlled conditions, so, in effect, an experiment. But at the same time, because it’s close to spiritism, which captures public attention, the press is very interested in what is happening and it wants the results as soon as possible. Ochorowicz said no, that as a scholar he could release results when the experiment was completed, and the way he recounted the séances to the press was very scholarly. But the press was so abuzz with information coming from sitters and various people that the experiment was ridiculed before Ochorowicz published his first insights. And to me, this was a clash between the scientific arena, in which information has to be certified or validated before the results get released, and the public arena, which tries to have a peek into what is happening in this black box of an experiment. So they clash and Ochorowicz’s reliability as a scholar was shattered because the public reached a verdict that he was manipulating the experiment and cannot be considered a serious scientist. Long story short, for me

¹⁰ ÖSTLING and LARSSON HEIDENBLAD 2020.

¹¹ ÖSTLING 2020a: 111-126.

¹² SURMAN 2021.

this is an example of how differing speeds of information in two different arenas lead to the clash of ideas on the credibility of science. And I was wondering how much temporality plays a role in the way you conceptualize knowledge arenas.

JÖ: I must admit that I have not been thinking about temporality so much in those terms when I have attempted to define what an arena is. But I can definitely see how you could add that dimension to, and at least in some cases, make it more complex. Some arenas of knowledge have survived throughout the decades and have been, for example in the press, more or less the same. At the same time, of course, the context has changed very much. I have been writing about a kind of daily essay page, "Under the Line" (*Under strecket*), which is published in *Svenska Dagbladet*, one of the leading Swedish newspapers.¹³ It was established as a daily essay page in 1918 and it's still there. So every day since 1918 this Swedish paper has published an essay, often written by a scholar: a review, an intervention or a kind of general reflection on science, or literature, or philosophy, or history. And throughout the period this looks very much the same and it's also the same kind of people who are writing these articles every day in the 1920s as well as in the 2020s. However, of course, the media system, the system of knowledge, the surrounding context, all that has changed very much and so of course has the temporality. When it comes to this arena of knowledge, today everything is spread through Facebook and Twitter and that makes it on the one hand faster, and on the other hand we have digital storage facilities, so you can go back and find an article from 2007, which is still very much good coverage of a specific theme. That was also possible, of course, in 1957, but then you had to go to an archive. And that also affects the temporal structure of this arena of knowledge. On the one hand communication is much faster, while on the other hand it's always or will always be digitally available, at least from the late 1990s and onward.

I am sure that different arenas of knowledge also have different temporal dimensions and temporal structures. But they could change even though the very arena, when we look at the contents for example, remains more or less the same.

JS: I was actually thinking about two things when you were speaking about the daily essay page. One of them is that when I was studying in Austria, for 10 years or so the public television station repeatedly failed to establish a public science program. They always tried something new, but after two months they would give up because it did not work, even if it had a prime-time slot. And the same thing was actually happening in several countries of which I have knowledge. Scholars want to have a very informative and dense program, which is completely unworkable in the current media environment. Media people are already aware that if they were to make such a program, as they had in the 1970s, it would receive a slot at midnight because it would interest a very specific and extremely small

¹³ ÖSTLING 2020b: 95-124.

group of people (who are likely to be awake at midnight). Scholars don't really want to participate in something like "pop knowledge" because they say that it's too uncomplicated and that in the very end it does not benefit science. And, the second thing is the current discussion about social media and post-truth. Thus I was wondering, to what extent do you think that the failure, or problems, of science reaching a higher number of people has to do with social media and the way it presents knowledge and science, or is it an older phenomenon?

JÖ: This is a very big question. Social media can mean many different things, but it has accelerated the understanding of what knowledge could and should be – that it should be fast and entertaining in some way. But we also have other initiatives. I'm not sure if you are aware of *The Conversation*? It was originally an Australian website, but now you can also find it in Britain and in other countries. It is a website where researchers write about their field of expertise but the articles are edited by journalists, or former journalists, and they tweak it – formulate it in a more journalistic fashion in order to make it more attractive. *The Conversation* is free of charge and these articles are fully free to distribute through social media, so you can republish them, and universities pay an annual fee to be part of this enterprise. So it's in one way a kind of classical popular science, but it takes advantage of social media and the digital formats and the speed they create. The day after the new Nobel Prize laureates were presented you had a chemist, for example, who introduced the topic of their research and put it in the relevant context. It was not written by a science journalist but by a chemistry researcher. The digital transformation of the public sphere and communication patterns have had profound effects, but not in a simple way. There are many different implications in the many new formats that we can see. We can also think about podcasts for example, not least for young listeners. Many of them are very serious, others are mainly entertaining. We are speaking of an entire spectrum of different things here.

JS: I completely agree. We also have this trend of popularization of knowledge, maybe not mandated by the European Union and its funds and programs, but at least very strongly supported and encouraged by them. From my experience, historians and historians of science have many more problems with this – the idea of popularizing knowledge – than the people actually working in the natural sciences. Natural scientists already seem to have the feeling that their work has to be translated in order to be understood, while humanities scholars always think that they can do it by themselves. This sometimes works better, sometimes worse. So I was wondering exactly to what extent the history of knowledge in circulation and the question of arenas also encourage a very applied history of knowledge, showing how knowledge should circulate in order to be understood.

JÖ: Well, at least it proposes seeing our contemporary society in that way. I mentioned *The Conversation* and for me that is a new arena of knowledge, which

I could compare to what you were describing, a kind of post-war model where you had those kinds of television programs – serious programs run by elderly men telling you about new findings in the natural sciences, not least space exploration in the 1960s and so on. This kind of history of knowledge approach, stressing public circulation of knowledge and public arenas of knowledge, puts our contemporary society in perspective and highlights what is perhaps also missing.

JS: I was actually thinking now that we might really miss these older men who are saying what is true and what is not, because now we face the parallelization of knowledge arenas, and every Facebook bubble is a knowledge arena unto itself. So in a way, the disappearance of these wise men of knowledge also has consequences. We have to discuss them, but we also need models for acting without reinstating these old men of knowledge, because that obviously will not work.

This leads me to the last question: have the COVID-19 pandemic and the last two years of discussion about knowledge and vaccinations actually changed your ideas about knowledge and knowledge in circulation and, if so, how? In the pandemic, we have seen two trends occurring at the same time. A part of the population now trusts science more because it quickly developed solutions to deal with the pandemic. But a considerable part of society also doubts science more precisely because the vaccine was developed so quickly, and because of the fear or side effects, etc. So the part of the population which already had doubts in science has even more. The divisions which we are trying to bridge have actually grown deeper. I wanted to ask whether the way in which the experience of the last two years was discussed in the media, and the way in which knowledge about it circulated in the media, changed your ideas about knowledge and about arenas of knowledge.

JÖ: First of all, I think you are completely right; we see this this growing division between different understandings of science and public knowledge at large. And perhaps you see it even more clearly from your position in Central Europe than I do from Scandinavia where, after all, most people rely on the government and the institutions of science. But you're right; we face a serious problem concerning growing distrust in science and more broadly in knowledge institutions. One recent example is Harvard and their campaign in response to our post-truth condition. It is a very elegant and powerful campaign in which they gathered many excellent researchers to try to tackle this issue of post-truth and resistance to facts, etc. But I wonder how many people will look at this and change their mind. Those who go to Harvard's website are probably those already convinced of the benefits of science, and those who are not would never consider visiting an Ivy League digital platform in the first place. So after all, it is more to reinforce self-confidence or the feeling that we belong to a specific community rather than to convince those with differing opinions.

But perhaps as historians of knowledge our contribution could be to study how public trust in science and knowledge institutions have been established throughout the 20th century through education systems, through various democratic popular movements, through public arenas of knowledge, etc. That could perhaps be our contribution: these infrastructures of knowledge are essential in order to maintain public trust in science. This is not something that is a given forever. On the contrary, it has been established through various actions throughout history. So I think that this could be a contribution that we as historians of science and knowledge could make.

JS: Thank you, I think those are very good closing words. Once I came across documents about “Wissenschaftsbüros,” offices where everyone could come in and ask questions about science – it was a project in the late 1980s in one of the Germanies, but I suppose it was never implemented because of the collapse of the Soviet Union and German unification. But I truly hope that someone will pick up on your idea and write a history of institutions supporting trust in scientific knowledge, and then maybe we will find more stories and examples like the science offices.

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