

Construction of Health Knowledge in an Alternative Medical Community of Practice: Hermeneutic Analysis of a Web Forum

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Abstract: This paper presents a hermeneutic analysis of a web forum in which supporters of an alternative medical approach, the so-called *Urkost* (“primordial food”) movement, are gathered as a community of practice, and in which they exchange information and opinions in order to pass on and develop relevant knowledge. In our analysis of knowledge construction, we were able to identify four aspects. 1) Imparting a certain view of the world – knowledge creation provided an ideological guidance system. 2) Role structure within the community – the entire communication was centered on one individual expert who played the role of a kind of guru. 3) Persuasion and reinforcement of followers – the impartment of knowledge and persuasion were primarily based on an emotional type of communication. 4) Separation from “dissidents” – the attitude towards people of a “different faith” and towards standard medicine was characterized by strong hostility and rejection.

Introduction

Medical progress in Western civilizations has brought various achievements in the past decades. But the specialization and differentiation that accompanied these achievements is perceived by many patients and people who are seeking help as unpleasant and inappropriate, because often they feel they are being reduced to their symptoms, and have the impression of being left alone with their worries. Not surprisingly, many people prefer alternative medical approaches, which appear to take a more holistic view of human beings, and present solutions to health problems in simple language. This trend may be considered in the context of the development of cultic milieus in modern societies in general (Campbell, 1972) and medically oriented cultic milieus in particular (Salmon, 1984). New media make it very easy to catch up on what is known about diseases and treatments that represent alternative medical methods. For this purpose, a variety of different alternative medical communities have come together on the Internet, where they exchange their respective information. This paper explores how such communities create and develop their health knowledge. In the following section, one (quite radical) alternative medical community, the so-called *Urkost* movement, will be introduced. This community was selected for analysis because of three reasons: 1) This extreme movement represents a typical example of a cultic milieu, bearing in mind that its basic assumptions are highly controversial from a scientific point of view, but – nevertheless – it has a significant number of compliant followers. 2) The *Urkost* community is interesting as it propagates, on the one hand, an “archaic” lifestyle, but uses, at the same time, the Internet, which is really a typical post-modern form of communication. 3) This group has some characteristic features of a community of practice (see below), and the interesting question here is whether their development of knowledge occurs in a similar way as in a scientific community. After the introduction of the *Urkost* community we will describe the method that was applied here. In the main part, we will then present the four modalities of knowledge creation in the *Urkost* community, as they emerged from the data in our analysis: imparting a certain world view; role structure within the community; persuasion of newcomers and skeptics; and separation from standard medicine and people of some “different faith”. In the conclusion, our findings will be summarized and discussed.

The *Urkost* Movement As an Alternative Medical Community of Practice

The term *alternative medicine* (Bratman, 1997) refers to all those procedures and methods of treatment in the field of medicine which are not (or only to some limited extent) accepted by conventional medicine, because their claimed effects cannot be substantiated using scientific methods. Alternative medical communities are characterized by a shared interest in a certain topic. The members of such communities look into the subject of their shared interest and deal with it; and in this process they develop corresponding competencies. In this context, knowledge development is supposed to take place at both an individual and a collective level (Kimmerle, Cress, & Held, 2010). The *Urkost* movement (the German term *Urkost* may best be translated as “primordial food”) was established by Franz Konz (*1926), who was at one time well known in Germany as an author of handbooks on how to save tax. In the first instance, *Urkost* is a nutrition concept that says that all diseases are a consequence of some lifestyle that is not in harmony with nature. Nutrition is considered as an essential part of a natural lifestyle, and it is assumed that all diseases may be cured by *Urkost* diet and by a

certain type of physical activity (*Ursport*). *Urkost*-style nutrition consists of raw vegetables, fruit, and wild herbs (such as dandelion). This raw food is neither washed nor cooked. Real followers of *Urkost* will not eat meat or any other animal products, but they are supposed to eat the insects that reside on plants which they eat (Konz, 1999). *Urkost* followers are also advised to eat humus from time to time.

The Internet is a quick and comfortable way of communicating between members of alternative medical movements, and this is also true of the *Urkost* movement. Its members use a web forum (<http://www.urkostforum.de>), in which they may search for and exchange information. This forum is targeted at people who practice *Urkost* or are interested in it. It is defined as a stage where *Urkost* is presented as a way of achieving a healthy lifestyle. The introduction page of the web forum explains that insults will be deleted and that a “loving and respectful” atmosphere of communication is desired. Brigitte Rondholz (“BR” in the following) – who is presented as the deputy of Franz Konz – is introduced as the regular moderator of the forum. She also appears to be the only administrator. This web forum provided the basic data for our hermeneutic analysis, which was conducted between April and September 2010. The users that come together on this web forum form a group that represents what Lave and Wenger (1991; Wenger, 1998) have described as a “community of practice”. The users of the *Urkost* forum share an identity that is defined by a common interest in a certain subject. Even though most people would probably not consider the *Urkost* idea as a topic worth knowing anything about, *Urkost* followers obviously learn from each other and appreciate their shared competence. The members of the forum are strongly committed to their domain and engage in discussions and collective activities. They support each other and exchange information. The members of the *Urkost* community are literally practitioners and, as will be described below, they share and develop a collection of resources, such as stories, experiences, or routines for dealing with recurring problems.

Hermeneutic Sociology of Knowledge

The analysis presented here examined how knowledge is developed in the *Urkost* community, why its followers believe in this health knowledge – despite all logical inconsistencies and missing evidence –, and how this faith is accomplished collectively. What occurs here is a social construction of reality (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1966), as people interacting with each other will experience that they may impute their own construction of reality and their corresponding emotions to others. Individuals will assume that what they think and feel would be correct because others seem to think similarly and report constructions that may be connected to one’s own opinions. Such a collective affect-logic (cf. Ciompi, 1991) is not necessarily connected to individual processes of reflection. The experience that another person to whom an individual feels some emotional commitment takes a similar stand towards a certain topic appears to be sufficient for conveying to that individual the impression that a statement or assumption is true.

In order to conduct a qualitative analysis of the social construction of reality and the development of knowledge in the *Urkost* forum, we followed the hermeneutic sociology of knowledge. This approach is a complex theoretical and methodological concept that aims at reconstructing any type of interaction (Reichert, 2004). An interpretation of data in the sense of this approach does not only consist of describing observations or reconstructing subjective meaning, but rather aims at detecting the inter-subjective meaning of actions. According to hermeneutic sociology of knowledge, the epistemologically appropriate attitude is one of general skepticism concerning social matters-of-course, and skepticism concerning prejudice in their interpretation. For our present analysis of knowledge communication and knowledge creation in the *Urkost* forum, we adopted such a hermeneutical attitude. The data that were used for our analysis are non-standardized data that occurred in a natural setting. They were not created for research purposes, so the collection of these data was not biased by any subjective observation schema. Moreover, our analysis was not restricted to previously determined research topics, but explored – in a first step that took several weeks – all contributions in this web forum, with respect to content, topics addressed, language, etc. This openness gave us various options of access and a bandwidth of topics from which we could select, as a second step, the most interesting and relevant modalities of knowledge construction in this community of practice. In this process of selection we made sure that the quantity of data obtained was sufficient for re-checking the explored aspects. In a third step, an analysis of the data was performed in such a way that contributions could be examined in more detail in their context. The insights that resulted from this procedure were challenged once again by amendatory and corrective interpretation by several researchers. Finally, the findings were ‘compacted’, transferred into written form, and illustrated with pertinent quotations from the forum (that represent only few examples from an abundance of data).

Analysis of Knowledge Construction

In the following four sub-sections, an analysis of the modalities of knowledge construction in the *Urkost* community will be presented. This analysis elicited four relevant aspects: impartment of a certain world view; role structure within the community; persuasion and reinforcement of *Urkost* followers; and their separation from standard medicine and people of a “different faith”.

“Let it be your green bible” – View of the World

In the following, we will explore how *Urkost* influences its followers’ way of life, at least according to discussions in this web forum. Our exploration provides an analysis that will be more concrete in the subsequent sub-sections on *role structure*, *persuasion*, and *separation*. When reading through the topics of the forum, one can easily see that nutrition and health do indeed play a central role, but they are by no means the only content. The ‘right’ attitude toward life and nature, to animal protection, religion, society, politics, sexuality, and many other topics are discussed as well. User “Waldelfe” wrote, for example (translated from German by the authors):

“As a conversion to Urkost changes nearly everything (for the better), sexuality will change as well. Nowadays, everything is about sex [...] Especially young people [...] attach great value to having a lot of sex, and finish a relationship when they do not turn on each other any more after some time. Franz Konz writes in his book that it is largely meat that leads to this excessive (?) craving and Schlechtkost¹ in general”.²

Urkost appears to be a general attitude with a strong impact on all spheres of life, and carries a certain view of the world. This attitude appears to come along with criticism of society and culture. The reference to Konz’ book as a guideline is another characteristic which can be found in many other contributions as well. The supposedly deficient lifestyle of the general population is attributed to eating *Schlechtkost*, i.e. “bad food”. The discussion that followed this contribution centered on what characterizes good sex in terms of *Urkost*. There were many judgments concerning good or bad, right or wrong. Many norms and attitudes of society were questioned fundamentally and rejected, while *Urkost*-style attitudes were praised. In addition, the *Urkost* supporters propagated in their postings a life in primordial conditions in paradise. *Urkost* is supposed to lead to living longer, becoming or staying healthy, being sporty, strong and attractive, being happy etc. The users do not tire of listing all the advantages of *Urkost*. Those who live on an *Urkost* diet are supposed to reach an old age happily and healthily, as may be seen from a contribution by the user “Taraxacum”:

“[...] here are my 20 reasons. 1 To become and to stay healthy. [...] 19. Urkost is the ideal way. 20. To die of old age with at least 120 years.” (Contribution date – format: dd.mm.yyyy: 07.02.2010, 03:32 pm).

People who live on *Urkost* commit themselves to a universal ideology that provides a guidance system and seems to bear some parareligious markings. The web forum was analyzed for religious aspects both linguistically and with regard to content:

1. The book by Franz Konz that was mentioned before is entitled *Der Große Gesundheits-Konz* (GGK) (“Konz’s Great Health Book”), but some *Urkost* followers also call it the *Green Bible*. This definitive book is cited repeatedly and serves as an orientation and source of arguments. For example, user “Karlina” wrote:

“You may find that all in the GKK, let it be your green bible, there you can find all the advice you need.” (11.03.2010, 10:27 am).

The content of this “bible” seems to be taken for granted, and citing from it is considered good form.

2. Recurring to biblical statements and Christian traditions may be found quite frequently (despite an ostensible denial of religiousness – as religion is related to society and culture and their negative connotations; instead, *Urkost* followers believe in “nature”). The following quotations by BR (a & b) and “Robert” (c), may illustrate this observation:

a. *“May this forum [...] be blessed.”* (02.07.2008, 09:06 pm).

b. *“I mean no harm to anybody, I even carry astonishingly much of this ‘love thy enemy’ with me that was demanded by Jesus.”* (16.06.2010, 09:07 am).

c. *“Paradise as described by the bible is not a utopian phantasy [...]”* (03.08.2010, 12:55 am).

In one posting BR presented nearly messianic promises in biblical terminology:

“Once we are a majority with our lifestyle [...], then there will really be something for everybody [...] and we can enjoy the abundance. [...] Just like paradise.” (20.05.2010, 10:23 am).

3. User “Urtica” wrote:

“In our allegedly well-informed world, two superstitions appear to be ineradicable, because people want to believe in them: that they were capable of living on after death, and that there was some miraculous cure to take away their sins committed against life and nature. [...] Believing in medical miracles is a global disease, one of mankind’s many superstitions [...]” (04.06.2010, 08:08 pm).

While placing medicine at the same level as civilization and faith, this user employs Christian terms such as *sins* or *life after death*. Everything that is not in line with *Urkost* is attributed to superstition.

In addition to such religious aspects, it may be noted that the *Urkost* movement fulfils some criteria of a sect. The community is clearly focused on a leading figure (see the following sub-section on ‘role structure’): BR is a leading figure of the *Urkost* movement, as may be seen from her great activity in the forum. She is successful in committing followers to herself and her doctrine of salvation (see sub-section on ‘persuasion and reinforcement’). Salvation is equalized with healing from some illness, something reported quite frequently in the forum (e.g. *“Due to Urkost, we became healthy again”*). The community members perceive themselves as surrounded by enemies. The *Urkost* movement turns against *Schlechtköstler* (“bad food eaters”) and considers them enemies. Criticism is not possible, neither from inside nor from outside; those who question certain positions, express criticism, or even support methods used by standard medicine will be outcast or vilified (see

sub-section on ‘separation from dissidents’). The *Urkost* movement is not a sect in the narrow sense: it does not persecute renegades (at least, there is no evidence in the forum) or expose dissidents, but it features some criteria of a sect. What we may conclude from this analysis is that knowledge creation in the *Urkost* community goes beyond questions of nutrition and health; it rather aims at providing an ideological guidance system.

“You are under special surveillance now” – Role Structure

How does the role structure in the *Urkost* community influence knowledge exchange between its members? Participants of the web forum differ with respect to the number of their postings. Apart from BR as administrator and a number of rather active members, there are also many registered users who are less active or have only participated for a short time. In order to be allowed to make contributions to the forum, one has to send an application to BR and needs to be approved by her as a contributor. At the formal level, we can only distinguish between the administrator and ordinary members. BR stimulates debates by introducing new topics into the forum. Even though BR is not always the first who raises a point for discussion, she gives her opinion on virtually every topic, so, for example, in a discussion on sexuality:

“You simply have to know that the mass media present sexuality in an absolutely incorrect way.” (13.06.2010, 08:17 pm).

Very often it seems as if the members wait until BR expresses her opinion, in order to simply express confirming views. One gets the impression that BR usually has the final say and that she does not only play the role of an expert (due to her experience and knowledge), but rather the role of a guru. She also rebukes other users for stating “wrong” opinions. For example, in a discussion on whether it is ‘correct’ to eat maggots in fruits, user “Dawn” (who was a member for only two weeks at this time) had written:

“[...] I support natural and organic as well, but I’d prefer chemistry to eating maggots.” (21.07.2010, 08:03 am).

BR replied:

“Prefer chemistry to maggots? 🙄 Sorry, but you don’t understand much of it yet, do you? [...] Have a nice time in the Urkost forum, but you are under special surveillance now, honey. 😊 But just reading what the others write is nice, too, and instructional above all, right? 🍷” (21.07.2010, 11:59 am).

This reprehension seemed to result from a position of strength and showed that BR clearly takes on a role in which she decides what is right or wrong. And the other users accept BR’s superiority: for example, user “orchidee” had written that in her opinion *Urkost* should not be practiced too strictly and that eating grain should be okay. BR answered by commenting every single sentence. Referring to the grain issue she wrote:

“[...] Humans are biologically not designed for grain. For every class of creatures on this planet nature has provided appropriate food. Each deviation leads to all sorts of problems: tumors, psychoses, depressions, allergies, etc.” (26.03.2010, 11:49 am).

Subsequently, user “orchidee” confirmed:

“You were right, once again [...] so far you have been right in the end in all discussions.” (26.03.2010, 01:41 pm).

Finally, BR answered:

“I am happy and I enjoy watching you learning” (27.03.2010, 12:41 pm).

BR plays the part of a guru, and it becomes apparent that two goals are associated with this role: followers and potential new members are to be persuaded and kept (this will be addressed in the following sub-section on ‘persuasion’) and separation from dissidents (cf. sub-section on ‘separation’).

“You are on the right path” – Persuasion and Reinforcement

In this sub-section, we analyze how followers are reinforced and persuaded to living on *Urkost* prescriptions. On the one hand, we describe how the community communicates with new members and how knowledge is passed on to them. On the other hand, we analyze how skepticism in their own ranks is dealt with (handling of criticism from outside will be analyzed in the following sub-section). An *Urkost* follower is expected to take a clear stand on all kinds of issues – breast feeding, vaccination, natural contraception, or on whether vegans are allowed to kill ticks. This may be a great challenge to new members, and they tend to seek support from established *Urkost* followers. This is why it is interesting to analyze how new members are attracted. At first sight, the *Urkost* forum appears to be an open community. New members are welcomed to get to know the *Urkost* lifestyle. In order to analyze contributions that refer to attracting members, we selectively searched for responses to contributions by new users (newcomers were defined as users who joined less than three months ago). It was found that newcomers are received very cordially. New user “januschka” got three welcome greetings within one day. The newcomers’ questions are taken seriously and answered in a personal way. For example, a new user was unhappy about eupepsia problems since he switched to raw food. He was praised for switching to raw food and his problems were traced back to being not consequent enough, as user “apfel” noted:

“You are on the right path, keep going [...], but there is a lack of wild plants [...] you eat too many cultivated plants” (05.09.2010, 10:10 pm).

Urkost followers try to give others a feeling of security. In this pursuit, a tough-minded attitude towards *Schlechtkost* is given high priority. Usually, these users refer to some personal experience, but factual arguments are rare. Negative presentations of *Schlechtkost* are contrasted with salutary *Urkost*. This contrast is the basis for reinforcing and motivating followers. When users describe some conflict with non-*Urkost* people, they experience strong support in the forum: they are incited not to listen to them, and supplied with encouraging stories and phrases that can be used as replies in debates. But as soon as a certain period of grace is over, it turns out that the users monitor each other's compliance with the *Urkost* regulations, and evaluate each other accordingly. Members who practice *Urkost* in a half-hearted way, will experience harsh criticism (see above). Sometimes this results in the withdrawal of a member. As an example, we analyzed a dispute with user "Petra". The original debate cannot be depicted completely, as this user withdrew from the forum and her contributions were deleted. But we may reconstruct some of her statements as they have been quoted by other users. "Petra" said goodbye with these words:

"[...] Even though [...] I have met some lovely people, I found out very quickly, unfortunately, that one's own opinions are only accepted if they are consistent with those of the person who runs this forum."

She also complained about *"insults below the belt"* and concludes:

"I can only advise against fully believing in ideologies, health literature, or scientific reports."

BR reacted with disapproval. Other members joined in and attacked "Petra". User "amelia" wrote:

"All I can say about Petra: She really hasn't understood anything. Moreover, she lets herself be influenced by propaganda against the Urkost forum and against you [BR], instead of thinking for herself." (26.06.2010, 10:54 am).

User "cherrycurry" added laconically:

"Eating meat makes you daft, it seems" (26.06.2010, 11:52 am).

BR also likes to impute *"shabbiness of character"* to dissenters (20.06.2010, 11:52 am).

Reinforcement, motivation, and mutual support occur at an emotional level and are based on a separation from skeptics in the forum users' own ranks (such as "Petra") and dissidents (cf. next sub-section). Many discussions are rather personal, and this may have a positive effect on members by inducing a feeling of security. But this personal atmosphere of communication may also be provocative and offensive. At the surface the healing effects of *Urkost* are praised, but underneath many members seem to be rather vulnerable. The *Urkost* followers appear to be easily assailable and under constant pressure to justify. Critical dialogue is hardly imaginable from such a position and not really taking place. Discussions are dominated by references to personal experience. The goal is not to exchange valid arguments, but to be there emotionally for the like-minded and to signal that one is on the right track.

"Let them die stupidly from diseases" – Separation from Dissidents

The followers consider *Urkost* as the only right path. Accordingly, people of some "different faith" are despised, or pitied at best. When conflicts with *Schlechtkost* eaters are discussed, many statements express the superiority of *Urkost* followers in terms of a principle of selection. For example, user "Irmisato" wrote:

*"Don't listen to those people who want to put you off Urkost. Just say: 'We'll talk again in 50 years'. And think: '... in case **you** are still alive then'."* (10.06.2010, 01:35 pm).

This principle of selection (in terms of social-Darwinistic ideology) is even more apparent in a comment by user "Robert":

"Let them die stupidly from diseases, nature is tough sometimes, but always wise..." (10.06.2010, 05:11 pm).

What finds expression here is the notion, also known from other pre-modern views of the world, that one is struck by illness as a consequence of guilt or sin. This was a common attitude in the ancient world and the Middle Ages (Riese, 1953). The members of this forum appear to take for granted that the *Urkost* lifestyle is superior, and that this is expressed by their own health. They believe that this superiority will be evident in the long run and find expression in a longer life of *Urkost* followers. An explanation for the supposed misbelief of dissidents is provided by user "Nera":

"The majority still believes in the lies of science and does not make an effort to question them. Authorities mean more to them than critical thinking and insight." (13.06.2010, 08:13 am).

This statement not only contains an explanation for the behavior of dissidents, it also implies a superiority of *Urkost* followers in thinking and reasoning: *Urkost* followers consider to distinguish themselves from non-believers by greater intellectual ability as well. In order to be separated from dissidents more easily and protected from criticism, it is sometimes discussed to switch to a closed web forum. But this proposal was rejected by user "Ritchen":

"By no means should the entire Urkost forum become private. As you [BR] had said before, this is VERY IMPORTANT because of public relations in particular. We want to tell people that this road exists. And many have already found it – through Brigitte, her forum, her blog, her seminars." (20.06.2010, 12:17 pm).

But it appears that an additional closed forum is also in existence, in which even more radical ideas may be exchanged. There is a posting by BR in which she mentioned a “private *Urkost* forum” and explained:

“By all means, one can be more explicit there than here, and I will permit access only restrictively to hand-picked people.” (01.07.2010, 04:58 pm).

As far as standard medicine is concerned, the attitude expressed is critical, to put it mildly. There is fundamental doubt that standard medicine is able to cure any disease at all. For example, user “Robert” wrote:

“Who cures is right! And somebody has to prove to me that physicians have ever cured anything with their standard medicine!” (10.06.2010, 05:11 pm).

Another example is a contribution by user “apfel”:

“She [BR] is a fighter for the good on all levels (Not only when it is about the lies of standard medicine, woman-destroying contraceptive pills, vaccination, human suffering).” (31.07.2010, 05:17 pm).

This, generally, very critical attitude also applies to specific procedures of standard medicine, for example, vaccination, as can be seen from a contribution by user “Jana” in a discussion on the necessity of inoculation and the normal number of infectious diseases:

“We only have one infection per year. After two years, still breast fed and completely unvaccinated. My personal assumption is that the main cause for this alarming state of the children’s health is vaccination.” (31.07.2010, 03:49 pm).

Other users took the same line, for example “Nera” and “apfel”:

*“Nice, if you can lay the blame for secondary complications of vaccination on some phantom germs. Saves jobs, doesn’t it? *cough*”* (31.07.2010, 03:56 pm).

“Vaccinations are really very, necessary/important ... for the moneybag of the greedy pharmaceutical industry. It is sad that innocent children are exposed to dangerous vaccinations.” (31.07.2010, 01:41 pm).

The sarcastic tone in these comments is characteristic of contributions that deal with standard medicine. It seems as if this diction is supposed to express their authors’ perceived own superiority, or, perhaps, resignation in the face of the incorrigibility of the rest of the world. Critical discussion on the necessity and the risks of vaccination are, of course, not restricted to groups like the *Urkost* community, even though the particular way in which this fraternity addresses the topic is rather exceptional. What is even more peculiar is their attitude to HIV/AIDS, where the discrepancy between standard medicine and *Urkost* views is particularly apparent. The *Urkost* followers not only criticize the methods of HIV/AIDS treatment, but their criticism goes further: they doubt the existence of AIDS, as a viral disease, in general. User “Nera”, for example, claimed:

“[...] Aids is not a disease caused by a “virus”, and it is curable at any time.” (10.07.2010, 12:31 pm).

This statement was broadly supported by other users. User “Robert” wrote on this topic:

*“Correct. Aids is the outbreak of various diseases due to a f***ed up immunity system. Earth fast³, *Urkost*, sports and it can be cured.”* (20.07.2010, 11:29 am).

AIDS is considered as a lie that is maintained due to financial interests. At someone’s suggestion to move this topic of AIDS healing to a private forum, BR answered:

“The Aids critics are reputable and there is no reason to hide them. Rather those people should hide who keep the money-printing machine running although they know better.” (21.07.2010, 07:04 pm).

So far, we have analyzed a rather theoretical attitude to standard medicine and its representatives. But what will *Urkost* followers do when they meet physicians, who represent standard medicine, and how will they react to diagnoses by conventional medicine in their everyday life? Some forum contributions give the impression that some *Urkost* followers indeed turn to doctors of medicine – especially with severe diseases, such as tumors, or when children are concerned. The recommended treatments, however, are often rejected. Instead, they try to cure themselves the *Urkost* way, as can be seen from the example of user “Jana” who reports that she suffered from a tumor in the parotid gland:

“[...] Surgery denied. Switched to raw food the next day, after 6 weeks tumor not palpable anymore. In April 2010 finally another MRI, and last week finally its results. Tumor completely disappeared.” (01.06.2010, 09:07 pm).

What is interesting here is that methods of standard medicine such as an MRI are accepted and taken for granted, and that the results of this procedure are awaited eagerly, as can be concluded from the double use of the word “finally”. Further contributions in this thread show that the other users do not only regard this as a fight against the tumor, but also praise it as a victory against the physicians. User “Bartok” wrote in this context:

“Hello Jana, that is great 🙌🙌🙌 You can be veeeery proud of you that you showed the ropes to the tumor and to the doctors. What did the doctors say about it? Would be nice if you told us how they responded to the refusal of surgery and the disappearance of the tumor.” (02.06.2010, 07:57 am).

“Jana” answered that the doctors would deny any relation between *Urkost* and the healing, and expressed her disappointment:

“I would have been glad if I could have made the doctor think. But this was not the case.” (02.06.2010, 10:28 am).

This disappointment reflects the ambivalent relationship to physicians, which was mentioned above. On the one hand, as representatives of standard medicine, they are considered as enemies, in theory. But, on the other hand, they are consulted, their diagnoses are regarded as real, and their evidence for diseases and for recovery are completely accepted. In the stage of treatment, however, what they say is irrelevant. It seems as if doctors were important authorities, whose persuasion would be a great success. Physicians and their diagnoses are by no means ignored, they rather represent a point of friction that is heavily discussed.

An aspect on which the forum is not very explicit is the attitude of *Urkost* to other alternative medical approaches and procedures. One example in which another alternative medical procedure was advised was the case of a mother (user “Kleeblatt2007”) who wrote that her little son had started to be cross-eyed. On the one hand, she was surprised:

“We are sad, because we had thought that this would not occur with Urkost” (13.07.2009, 08:31 pm).

But she admitted that she had eaten meat from time to time during pregnancy, and assumed that this might be a potential reason for her son’s strabismus. She asked for suggestions, and various alternative medical procedures were recommended to her which are not based on *Urkost*. But this seemed to be no problem here. Users “alice”, “Mangofan”, and “uma” recommended various methods:

“I finally came across Glenn Doman [...] I would never recommend glasses. Because these do not stimulate the brain, quite the opposite.” (14.07.2009, 12:15 am).

“Strabismus is not a disease but a dysfunction that can be resolved in many cases, following Dr. Bates in his book [...]” (17.07.2009, 10:35 am).

“I started a cranio-sacral-therapy with her [her cross-eyed daughter] [...]”. (30.09.2009, 11.08 am).

A separation can be found in this discussion as well, but, again, mainly from standard medicine, which can be seen in some side blows, for example in a contribution by user “Mangofan”:

“Ametropia is always caused by stress, because the external muscles of the eye disarrange the eyeball, especially when a toddler is examined by an eye doctor.” (17.07.2009, 10:35 am).

Surprisingly, the professional medical background of authorities is considered as positive if the approaches of these medical authorities are like-minded with the respective user’s view of the world. Two examples were provided by the users “alice” and “Mangofan”:

“Glenn Doman [...] is a physiotherapist and has worked for more than 60 years with brain-injured children.” (14.07.2009, 12:15 am).

“Fortunately, Dr. W. H. Bates has been doing research for nearly 40 years and found that eyesight improved with anatomically correct use of the eyes with the brain. He was a physician, ophthalmologist, and eye surgeon.” (21.07.2009, 06:28 am).

And even BR applies this strategy, for example in the following posting:

“‘Humans are not really granivores’, says Karl Pirlet, Professor of Internal Medicine. only for the last 15,000 years have humans eaten grain, too short for a real genetic adaptation.” (26.03.2010, 11:49, am).

This is an indication of what might be called the *fundamentalist eclecticism* in the *Urkost* community: anecdotic knowledge is indiscriminately mingled with medical and scientific findings. Often, scientific medicine is fundamentally criticized in the same breath as a reference to some scientific study is cited as evidence for the trueness of one’s own world-view.

Conclusion

In this paper, we provided a qualitative hermeneutic analysis of a web forum, in order to examine how a (rather radical) alternative medical community of practice, the so-called *Urkost* movement, applies the Internet as a platform for knowledge exchange and knowledge construction. The *Urkost* community is concerned, primarily and at first sight, with aspects of nutrition and health, but what happened in this forum exceeded the construction of health knowledge and addressed an ideological view of the world in general. Even though a holistic approach is typical of alternative medical communities, the way in which a construction of reality took place in the *Urkost* movement was definitely exceptional. So our findings cannot be generalized to knowledge construction in other alternative medical communities, but it was still revealing to elaborate on the structures of knowledge exchange that emerge from our hermeneutic analysis of this particular alternative medical fraternity. Even though the exchange processes that we analyzed did not really represent knowledge development in scientific terms, what occurred from the *Urkost* point of view was indeed a form of knowledge advancement, users learning from each other, forming a collective identity, and developing a common repertoire of resources. Our hermeneutic procedure identified four aspects of knowledge creation within this community of practice.

Firstly, we examined to what extent *Urkost* is more than just alternative medicine to its followers. It appears that *Urkost* is rather a holistic ideology and attitude towards life adopted by members of the *Urkost* forum. Their contributions showed that they do not only refer to curing diseases, but address a great variety of topics of everyday life. The influence of *Urkost* on these people’s lives bears some parareligious markings. Concerning the second aspect of knowledge creation, the role structure in the forum, it was found that there is one administrator who clearly took the position of a leader or guru. Such an outstanding position is actually

untypical of a community of practice, but its existence is comprehensible – and this is in line with theory – because this person plays a significant role when it comes to ensuring compliance with group norms and the formation of identity: she initiated new discussion threads, commented other contributions very frequently, and was always on the spot when it came to defending the *Urkost* lifestyle in a quite dominant way. The third part dealt with the question how communication was used to put newcomers on the right track and rebuke members who expressed deviant opinions. It was found that the *Urkost* forum welcomed new members in a quite cordial and open way. Critical questions or comments, however, were not accepted, and answered brusquely and reprehensively. Both the motivation of the forum members and responses to critics were communicated in an emotional and personal manner. The final part of the analysis of knowledge-creation structures examined the attitude of the *Urkost* community to standard medicine. We found a critical, even hostile communication style when the topic of doctors, their treatments, and standard medicine in general came up. The behavior of standard medicine representatives was criticized and it was even insinuated that conventional medicine would do harm to patients intentionally and out of greed. By clear-cut communicative separation from standard medicine, a feeling of supremacy and, perhaps, also a sense of uncertainty of the *Urkost* followers were expressed.

It may be concluded that the community that was examined here is, in large parts, a prime example of a community of practice: the identity of this group is defined by a shared interest, its members are engaged in joint discussions, and they have developed a shared repertoire of stories and cases for their practice. Many things that were going on in this community may appear absurd or insane to outsiders, but it makes perfect sense – from a systems theoretical, constructivist point of view: the social system (in terms of Luhmann, 1995) described here uses its own operations in order to distinguish itself from its environment (e.g. from standard medicine) and, in doing so, determines what is accepted as legitimate content of its own communication. As a consequence, communication takes place in a way that allows connectivity for further pertinent communication. Within the scope of this self-organization (in terms of autopoiesis) the system maintains itself, reduces complexity from the environment and constitutes meaning (cf. Kimmerle, Moskaliuk, Cress, & Thiel, 2011).

Endnotes

- (1) The term “*Schlechtkost*” – like “*Urkost*”, not really an existing word in German – is often used by the *Urkost* followers and may be translated as “bad food”. This neologism is reminiscent of the terminology used in G. Orwell’s “1984”.
- (2) No contribution date is provided for this quotation, because this user left the web forum early in September 2010 and all her contributions were deleted. We had taken down this quotation at an earlier session, but could not find it any more in the web forum when we wanted to note the contribution date.
- (3) “*Erdfasten*” – literally “earth fast” – is the *Urkost* “starting diet” that people are supposed to go through before they start living on *Urkost*.

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