

# When knowledge becomes a commodity

Martina Franzen

Sam's eyes are glued to the screen: the figure has just passed the 50,000 mark with three minutes to go before the start. Normally the number of followers levels out at 65,000, but if this continues, it could be a record. Today's topic is "sociological classics." The countdown blinks: 3, 2, 1:

"Welcome to the Nostalgia Channel, nice to see you again! For those of you who don't know me yet, my name is Sam and that stands for: Sophisticated – Ambitious – and More."

She proudly announces that for the first time she can present seven first editions of classics as the information gathering department has done a good job. The online community oohs and aahs. You can almost hear the "like" counter rattling. To keep up the tension in the live video, Sam has wrapped up each work individually, like individual gifts to the world, so she can unpack them one at a time. Mentimeter feedback shows she's guessed right as anticipation grows. She starts with Max Weber. The presentation is well rehearsed with key theoretical arguments translated into sound bites. When she holds the work up to the camera, she has already listed the essential concepts: What is the spirit of capitalism? What led to the disenchantment of the world? Why is an academic career a hazard? Her explanations win hearts all round. #Tamina, who is always there for classics sessions, posts the first quiz

question: "What was the nickname Max Weber gave his wife Marianne?" The community spouts witty lists of affectionate monikers. "That's good," thinks Sam; "good for the click rate."

She is pleased with the outcome of the session. She gained 2,300 new followers and lost very few. Today the reach of her channel in the comparative segment is 12 per cent, a personal record. Sam tweets her success and the retweets and likes come in droves. She leans back to get started with the really exciting part, but topic-modelling analysis of some 7,000 comments doesn't produce any real surprises. Comments and queries tally with the key discussion points already collected centrally on the works of Weber, Tönnies, Durkheim & Co. Sam decides that the laborious processing of the topic graphics for the documentation can wait till after lunch. Still, ten colleagues have reacted positively to her socializing question.

Sam sprints to the serving counter and reserves the table so as not to miss any new faces as she's rarely in the canteen at this time of day. Judging by the badges, four of them are from the trending topics department, two from the social media department, one from health and care, and there are two from supervision that she already knows well.

“Hi, good to see you,” she says to the two who head the enhancement course she’s been taking for the past two weeks.

Someone else takes a seat directly opposite her, and Sam catches her breath when she realizes it’s Tom who is one of the three managing directors. She’s never before spoken directly to any of them. Next time she must really sound out the socializing response qualitatively so she’s better prepared for such an encounter.

Tom smiles at her knowingly, “I followed your curve today. Twelve per cent is impressive.”

“Thank you so much,” says Sam, somewhat embarrassed knowing that hardly anything of substance came of it, even if the figures are correct.

“We want to make you an offer,” says Tom, not beating around the bush. Sam ponders what sort of an offer he’s talking about. Perhaps a fixed hourly rate? Promotion to the Science Giants Team? Or even the legendary three-year contract she, like everyone else here at the institute, has been working towards but always considered a pipe dream?

“We want you to join our new science-on-demand program,” he declares in a solemn tone. “Our new service seeks to capture the spirit of time. Requests are increasing so fast we can’t keep up with the content, so we’re going to increase the staff of the department and you’ve been selected.” Sam thanks Tom for this great development opportunity, but her disappointment is evident. Cautiously, she asks, “Just so I understand, what sort of enquiries are we talking about?”

Her colleague and friend Kim from the trending topic department told her that the science-on-demand program was intended to become the cashcow for the company. “Whether for a club jubilee or a mother-in-law’s 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, your job is to bring science into the home. Demographic change, the transport turn, educational poverty, or migration – our young social scientists will explain the empirical basics to you and provide you with the right arguments for any cultivated conversation. Do not hesitate to contact us, we are open to your requests.”

At the press of a button, the advertising for Science on Demand comes up on the screen directly behind him. Sam has an uneasy feeling, but Tom gets more specific: “At the moment the Nostalgia Channel is trendy among affluent clients, as you know. Content has become a status symbol. We see great potential here for transforming our social-science knowledge service into a user-centered service that adds value and may bring in a few bucks.”

Sam knows that if she accepts this offer, she’ll not only lose her follower community, which she’s built up so laboriously, but also means her autonomy in topic setting, leaving aside the personal unpredictability of a client’s overbearing tendency. “What other options do I have?,” she asks quietly but firmly, and looks Tom straight in the eye for the first time.

*Martina Franzen was research fellow in the research group Science Policy Studies, and is now fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities (KWI Essen). More short stories can be found on her blog <http://fictionscience.blog>*