This workshop brought together scholars from Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom researching topics of rumors, gossip, and scandals in American history. In his introduction, Sebastian Jobs described the theoretical concept of “uncertain knowledge” as an umbrella term for various practices of knowledge production such as rumors, libel, slander or denunciation. Contrary to many scholars who consider these phenomena mere disturbing interferences in communication, Jobs proposed to use the lens of “uncertain knowledge” to go beyond the dichotomy of historical “true” and “false” and to take these irritations and crises of knowledge seriously in order to analyze the dynamics of knowledge production. Thus, rumors and gossip could be a means to understand networks of communication and to bring into focus the fluidity and dynamic changes of categories with which Americans organized their lives and assigned meaning to their experiences. Furthermore, Jobs introduced the general outline and highlighted the three basic areas of inquiry on which the workshop discussions would touch, namely, actors, media, and practices within the field of “uncertain knowledge.”

The first panel focused on the uncertainties of physical intimacy and desire. In his paper on same-sex relations in New England in the early nineteenth century, Bruce Dorsey dismissed monocausal historical interpretations of homosexuality. Describing the case of a Christian minister who was said to have sexually harassed a fellow parishioner, he emphasized instead the fluidity of categories
employed to understand and describe sexual encounters. Thus, he offered a variety of perspectives contemporaries could have used to understand the behavior he was alleged to have committed: as a homosexual advance, as an educational measure, as an act of Christian brotherhood. Moreover, his contribution questioned the adequacy of today’s analytical concepts for grasping same-sex relations in the early American republic. In the same panel, Jennifer Manion gave a thought-provoking presentation about violence among women in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Pennsylvania. Interpreting trial records of assault and battery cases, she explored ways to decode these violent encounters as instances of physical intimacy and desire. In doing so, Manion addressed the uncertain knowledge toward same-sex relations and emotions as produced in official reports and as stored in archives. Thus, her paper posed a challenge to historians’ work with source materials insofar as it stressed the categories of archiving and the selectivity it imposes on the perspectives found in their sources. Moreover, she proposed interpreting the violent encounters of individual bodies as signs of a struggle within the American body politic over changing gender roles in the early republic.

The second panel focused on the emergence of “uncertain knowledge” in the American South. Sebastian Jobs offered a close reading of a slave insurrection panic in Murfreesboro, North Carolina, in 1857. In his paper, he explored how rumors about these uprisings reflected fears and stereotypes of the white population. At the same time, Jobs explained that these anxieties and panics created an “echo chamber” in which the utterances of African Americans resonated powerfully — thus creating power and agency for slaves. The panel’s second contribution analyzed the role of rumors in the American South during the Civil War. Jason Phillips argued that rumors were political and social visions that had an impact within the Confederate States. When, for instance, troops repeatedly reported the death of Union General Ulysses S. Grant, this not only presented an expression of wishful thinking, but also a way to explore alternative realities of war that went beyond mere battle reports. Phillips strongly advocated taking rumors and gossip seriously as they have had real effects within a certain group or society. Consequently, they can point to how people in the past understood and organized their experiences and their environment.

Gary Alan Fine’s keynote address on “The Promiscuity of Facts: Barack Obama and Uncertain Knowledge” concluded the workshop’s
first day. In his talk, Fine elaborated four specific rumors about President Obama: first, reports that he is not a natural-born American citizen; second, the assumption that he is a Muslim; third, stories that he was allegedly involved in a same-sex affair and drug abuse; and finally, the claim that he is an ideological socialist. Fine made a convincing case for the relevance of rumors in current American politics, and our need to engage with them as scholars.

The second day began with a panel about “uncertain knowledge” and social reform. Jennifer Fronc’s paper about “Private Surveillance and the Construction of Social Knowledge in Early-Twentieth-Century New York City” examined the work of voluntary undercover agents during World War I. In two case studies, Fronc explored how they assisted professional police detectives in investigating the emergence of political anarchism and prostitution. As these agents continuously grappled with the challenge of making valid claims about who was an anarchist or a prostitute, her paper explored how standards of plausibility emerged from their work. Robert Kramm-Masaoka continued with the topic of prostitution in his paper, demonstrating how administrative practices helped to overcome social uncertainty in post-World War II Japan. The rumor that American occupying soldiers would rape Japanese women, he argued, reflected the Japanese fear that this mutilation of the individual body would also affect the integrity of the Japanese social body as a whole. In order to prevent this kind of violation, Japanese administrators assumed a certain American need for sexual and erotic entertainment and erected a so-called “female floodwall”: prostitutes who served the mass of American soldiers and, thus, protected Japanese women.

The workshop’s last panel focused on the connection between visual representations and the uncertainty of knowledge of and about the human body. Taking on a topic from current affairs, Rachel Hall interpreted the unavailability of public visual proof that Osama bin Laden had been killed after the U.S. Special Forces operation in Pakistan in May 2011. Hall interpreted the lack of pictures as a shift in both official politics and public discourse on terror. The Obama administration’s refusal to present pictures of bin Laden’s corpse marked a distinct change from earlier political rhetoric that had employed figures of a Wild West manhunt. In that vein, Hall saw this return to civility in official statements as a chance to let go of the melancholia and paranoia that had haunted the American public in regard to the topic of terrorism. In his paper, Silvan Niedermeier joined the debate
about pictures as a means of overcoming uncertainty. His contribution dwelled upon the use of photographs during FBI investigations of police brutality toward African Americans in the 1930s and 1940s. On the one hand, photos of illegal and hidden acts of torture could stabilize claims African Americans made in court and, thus, amplify their voices within the legal system. On the other hand, even the plausibility of these depictions was insufficient to overcome white prejudices and stereotypes in Southern courts. Black testimony was still regarded as inferior and was often dismissed.

In his concluding statement, co-convener Olaf Stieglitz stressed the analytical value of “uncertain knowledge.” The workshop’s papers raised the question of the stability of knowledge over and over again. Thus, one of his conclusions was that “Every form of knowledge is potentially uncertain.” Therefore, Stieglitz called for a close historical analysis of actors and institutions of affirmation and doubt. Yet, he also stressed the concrete methodological ramifications the topic has for historians themselves. In their archival work, they constantly have to deal with the lingering question of what the uncertainty of knowledge that past actors experienced means for our own interpretations. As a result, the conditions of archiving and preserving historical materials have to be part of historical analysis as well.

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