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Kathrin Maurer and Christian F. Rostbøll

Introduction

Dave Eggers' novel *The Circle* (2013) tells the story about the eponymous powerful tech company, which develops cutting-edge digital technologies: social media platforms, miniature cameras, tablets, survey instruments, payment systems, health wristbands – all administered, connected, and monitored by the firm. The Circle community displays the consequence of 24/7 surveillance, total digitalization, and quantification of life. Although the dystopian aspects in *The Circle* are certainly powerful - it can be seen as a kind of reloaded version of George Orwell's *1984* for the digital age - the novel is not without utopian aspects, too. *The Circle* depicts the strong appeal of new technology, both at the utilitarian-economic level of cost-benefit analysis, as well as at the level of a high-tech lifestyle of convenience and pleasure. It is the goal of this contribution to connect these utopian and dystopian aspects of the novel to discuss the potentialities and risks of digital technology for democracy. Thus, we want to use the novel as an aesthetic case study of democracy in the age of digital technology.

Of specific interest is the Circle's model of *demoxie*, which in the company's view is the ideal form of democracy. Circle members vote directly via the company's internet platform. They vote on issues regarding healthcare, company policies, and international security straight from the social media app. In fact, the company started with the idea of merging the different internet accounts into one "TruYou" account – "one account, one identity, one password, one payment system, per person" (Eggers, 2013, p. 21).

In the novel, demoxie embodies a dangerous cocktail of corporate and governmental power since voting on the circle account should become mandatory for every citizen. Thus, the story portrays a totalitarian society in which digital technology and democracy do not mix well. However, in doing so, the *The Circle* also implicitly points to some categorical values of democracy that should be preserved, and it negotiates those with the new potentialities of digital technology. Using the novel as a backdrop, we engage in a discussion of three dimensions of demoxie, namely energy, transparency, and direct voting that highlight the Circle's inherent discourse about the values of democracy. Before this, a brief

reflection on our approach to use an aesthetic imaginary as a prism for political theory of democracy is in order.

Aesthetic Imaginaries of Political Practice

The Circle was published in 2013 and since then many other works of fiction on digital technology have come on the market. Think about Seth Fried *Municipalists* (2019), a novel about an American metropolis and the role of artificial intelligence. Or Ian McEwan's *Machines like Me* (2019), which describes a love triangle with the humanoid robot Adam. We chose *The Circle*, not only because its fictional scenario seems almost no fiction anymore in light of existing practices of worker surveillance at tech companies, but also because the novel is a great source for discussing aspects of digital democracy, as direct voting and transparency are key issues in this work.

The Circle represents a powerful Internet magnate, like the "frightful five," Google, Amazon, Facebook, Microsoft, and Apple, to use an expression from the New York Times Journalist Frahad Manjoo (2015). But the Circle is like all five combined into one, a frightful one. The Circle works with highly developed digital technologies to monitor everything and everybody. Although the Circle comes across as a creative, liberal, and multi-cultural firm – with Vegan weeks and yoga festivals, creative labs, and 'do-good-events' – the employees are subjected to constant surveillance. Circlers have implanted smart chips in their blood system that monitor their health data and they wear wristbands indicating their exact location and activity. Some of them have gone 'transparent' and carry a camera necklace around their neck 24/7. All the Circlers' movements are digitalized and stored in big data archives, where nothing disappears, nothing can be deleted, and everything is accessible to everybody. Circlers are constantly on social media and send frowns, likes, and statements about themselves to each other. Online popularity rankings are part of the work package and are seen as an honorable service to the Circle community. Nobody seems to mind the total surveillance. Circlers voluntarily carry around their own panopticon, watching themselves and others around the clock. In this state of total visibility, most of them say that they feel liberated and free. Privacy, as the source of all evil, is eradicated. Only, the leaders and a few anti-circlers seem to have some secrets. Although the Circle is at first just a gigantic company where one can join voluntarily, its increased attempts to regulate government procedures

(voting, security, crime fighting) makes it develop more and more into a totalitarian institution of government.

Although Eggers' fictional world in some ways comes close to the real world, we are less concerned with finding parallels and references between fiction and reality and more interested in using the aesthetic realm to reflect about digital democracy. Thereby we differentiate between how the web and digital technology can contribute to democratic processes (such as the use of social media and digital information), and digital democracy per se as a governmental model. From a cultural and visual studies point of view, there has been research about Eggers' novel discussing its engagement with posthumanism (Ludwigs, 2015, pp. 19-27), *The Circle* in light of dystopia as a literary genre (Herman, 2018, pp. 165-193), and new forms of surveillance (Gouck, 2018; Lyon, 2018, ch. 5). Whereas this research does excellent work to discuss *The Circle* as an example for the age of the posthuman, its place in literary history, as well as the change from panoptic surveillance to liquid forms of surveillance, an investigation of *The Circle* that explores its concept of demoxie is missing in current research. In this article, we intend to discuss this concept of demoxie conjoining an aesthetic approach to the *The Circle* with a theoretical analysis of digital democracy.

Aesthetics in this context embodies a privileged field of representation, as it can reflect about the usages and applications of technology, and its governance without needing to contribute to societal solutions, production, or market issues. The aesthetic work, in this case the novel *The Circle*, thus provides an experimental and non-instrumental imaginary about digital democracy. Political-technological scenarios have had a long tradition in the history of the novel, such as in H.G. Wells *The Time Machine* (1886) and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). In literary and cultural studies, there is a whole field that devotes itself to the genre of sci-fi and utopian poetics (Jameson 2015). In our analysis of Eggers' novel, we mainly focus on how this fictional and speculative scenario can provide insight into democratic discourse. In this respect, we consider literature as a field that can reflect, highlight, and make us aware of our cultural modes of perceiving social and political structures (Winkel Holm, 2012). Central in our literary analysis are, besides the theme of digital democracy, also the poetic strategies that the author employs in order to shape the world of the Circle. That is the use of metaphors, paradoxes, narrative view-point, and dramatic irony. Tracing these rhetorical-poetic

strategies in the novel is one of our methodological procedures to approach the novel's negotiations with the conditions of possibility of democracy in a digital world.

Further, aesthetic works can highlight a specific aspect that often seems to be underexposed in democratic practice and theory: affect and emotions. According to Jacques Rancière's aesthetic theory, affective experiences of an artwork can convey knowledge about sociopolitical processes, and this connection has guided our reading of *The Circle*. Eggers technological imaginary of total digitalization does not only embody individual fictional fantasies or illusions. Rather, this literary imaginary conveys a shared vision of social life, political discourses, cultural practices, and governmental power. In our approach, we use affects and emotions interchangeably since aesthetics can highlight both notions. Affects are often understood as utterances on the visceral, non-discursive level as unconscious expressions of the individual (Massumi, 2002, p. 27). Art can highlight these individual affects. However, for our purpose to analyze the *The Circle*'s reflection about digital democracy, it is also important not only to look at affects as individual intensities of feelings, but also as emotions. The notion of emotion refers to the cultural representations of feelings and their political and discursive power (Ahmed, 2004, p. 13). Works of art can capture affective knowledge of the world by displaying affective intensities, such as anger, pleasure, and excitement. In this context, these aesthetic displays of affects can give insights into the individual's interaction with technology. For us, it is decisive to analyze these affective intensities in the aesthetic work of *The Circle*, and by doing so also discuss their political and structural potential as emotions that in turn could shape political decisions and voting practices.

Although *The Circle* has a rather simplistic aesthetic and narrative design, it nevertheless displays a convincing impression of the affective states and intensities engendered by digital technology. The protagonist, Mae, for example, works herself up from a newbie in the company's customer service to a leader in the company. Right from the beginning of the story, she is empowered by innovative surveillance technologies available in the Circle. She feels thrilled, enthusiastic, and even giddy about the elegance of her new tablet, the beauty of her digital wristband, and the sublimity of all the computer screens on her desk. The glass architecture of the Circle buildings, the transparency and lightness have an elevating effect on her. But as Margaret Atwood in her excellent review of *The Circle* pointed out, "literary structures of glass, or its close cousin ice, are never reassuring" (Atwood, 2013, pp. 1-2). The

novel shows that these moments of empowerment are closely entwined with disempowerment. Mae's thrills and excitement about the technologies are accompanied by frequent anxiety attacks. She regularly feels what she calls a deep black "tear" in her body, in which she is afraid to drown and disappear: "She'd been feeling this, this black rip, this loud tear within her, a few times a week. It didn't usually last long, but when she closed her eyes she saw a tiny tear in what seemed to be black cloth, and through this tiny tear she heard the screams of millions of invisible souls" (Eggers 2013, pp. 195-196). Her best friend and colleague Annie tells her right away that once she is a member of the Circle, she will never be able to leave: "We'll hammer you with ten thousands tiny nails. You'll love it" (Eggers 2013, p. 16). Both sides of the emotional scale are present in the novel: the surveillance technologies relate to euphoria, joy, and excitement as well as to anxiety, stress, and angst. These affective reactions to technology are not only portrayed on the level of the individual protagonists, they also gain a collective-emotional dimension and are connected to democratic practice.

In sum, aesthetics should provide epistemic trajectories to get more insight and knowledge about the conditions of possibilities of digital democracy: Hereby aesthetics is understood as a critical discourse by which aesthetic representations of technology can observe (exaggerate, highlight, and intensify) the impact of technology on the human community. Aesthetics also embodies a form of perception, as the concept of *aesthesis* as sensory knowledge indicates. Aesthetic experiences with technology can highlight the affective and sensual contexts and embodiments that such technology is embedded in.

Demoxie as a Democratic Practice

The catchword for the Circlers' form of government is demoxie. Moxie, which was by the way the name of one of the first cream soda drinks introduced in the US in 1876, is a slang expression for energy, pep, skill, and emotional intensity. No longer the rule (kratia) of the people is central, but rather their impulses and affects. The people's moxie should vitalize society through instant and spontaneous engagement, re-connection, and participation enabled by ICT (Information Communications Technology). With demoxie, the Circle envisions a system of online voting via a so-called Circle account. This account not only provides access to all servers and registers (social security, taxes, email, social

media), but also registers Circlers as voters. Once registered, they vote in internet referenda on all kinds of matters (from work environment to security issues). Circlers see demoxie as what they call the purest form of democracy, a form of one hundred percent democracy. What are the chances and risks of such a demoxie? Is it doomed to lead to authoritarianism or could there be also a chance of new forms of democratic governance? In order to discuss these questions, we engage with the three aforementioned dimensions of demoxie: energy, transparency, and voting. We chose to engage with these three dimensions of demoxie since they all, as the following parts of this article will show, are reflected in the aesthetic design of the book and connected to a discourse on digtal democracy. Moreover, whereas other work on *The Circle* has focused on its relation to surveillance culture (Lyon, 2018: ch. 5), economization and voluntary servitude (Diken, 2019; McManus, 2017), how one is drawn in by rationally sounding arguments (Atwood, 2013), the reality of "mediated democracy" (Gray, 2016), no one has – to our knowledge – highlighted the centrality of emotional energy as the engine of democratic participation in the novel.

In political theory, it is generally agreed that democracy is characterized by political equality and freedom. In a democracy, those subject to political decisions – the *demos* – should have an equal say in making the decisions and they should be free to choose between different options. There are many different models of democracy, but for our analysis of demoxie, it is sufficient to draw two distinctions and mention four models of democracy. Thus, we get two different models of democracy depending on whether the free and equal say has to be direct or indirect (direct democracy versus representative democracy). And we get two different models of democracy depending on whether the 'say' is understood merely as a vote (aggregative or voter democracy), or as equal participation in public discussion or deliberation (deliberative democracy). In aggregative or voting models of democracy, democracy is only about recording people's preferences and counting their votes. In deliberative democracy, the aim of democracy is not just aggregating existing (often uninformed and unreflective) preferences, but about institutionalizing the conditions necessary for developing informed judgments about political issues and make decisions on their merits (Chambers, 2003; Rostbøll, 2008). Demoxie, as we shall see, introduces a form of direct, aggregative democracy, with no time for deliberation and no need for representatives. Some might want also to include the idea of "mediated democracy" here.

Thus, one commentator speaks of demoxie as "Mediated Democracy on steroids" (Gray, 2016). But insofar as we understand mediated democracy as about "the relationship of democracy and communication media" or "the interplay of democracy and digital media" (Hoffmann, 2019, pp. 3, 13), this is not what demoxie is about. As we shall see, with the introduction of demoxie, the Circle does not just supply a digital media that interacts with democracy; rather, it seeks to replace it.

Energy

By means of social media and instant online voting, the Circle intends to energize democratic processes. Those are simply accelerated as every circler who votes can right away see the outcome of the community's vote. No more waiting, no indirect election of representatives. Decisions are made in a split of a second, such as rulings about canteen food, bring your kids to work days, but also whether to arrest potential opponents of the Circle. However, not only the aspect of acceleration and dynamization play an important role in demoxie, but also the idea of pleasure. According to Aristotle, pleasure embodies an expression of *energeia*. Thereby pleasure is not understood as movement towards a telos, but rather a complete moment within a process of becoming. "Plainly, then, pleasure and movement must be different from each other, and pleasure must be one of the things that are whole and complete" (Aristotle, 1998, p. 255). In this context, pleasure can be understood as a type of momentary impulse, which can in turn be a catalysator of processes of becoming. In *The Circle*'s vision of demoxie, this aspect of pleasure as impulse and energy is clearly a defining moment of internet voting practices. The new tablet, the wristband, the shiny monitors that Mae receives during her career at the Circle invoke affects of pleasure and ecstatic joy; affective reactions that tech gadgets often evoke as dopamine research on new media has shown (Lindstrøm, 2010). The Circle uses state of the art technology to reward people and to suggest a cool lifestyle. It is hip to have a circle account and circlers get a kick from using, touching, and possessing these gadgets.

The linguistic style of the novel also plays in important role in highlighting this atmosphere of the pleasureful tech life. As a reader you will not find complex syntax and sophisticated word choice. Rather, the language is one that imitates social networking and text messaging. Colloquial, efficient, and easy

going; just as the members of the Circle tech company see themselves. They even invent neologism to highlight their uniqueness, such as the word 'zing' signaling an activity on social media.

This fetishization and celebration of technology is not limited to the individual. Rather, it is also a collective experience. There is a scene in the novel where May introduces a new tracking program, SoulSearch, of people that disappeared. In front of the whole Circle community in the audience, she is able to find a female criminal. She then is asked to track down her ex-boyfriend Mercer, who is an anti-Circler hiding somewhere in the Californian woods. The search ends tragically with Mercer's death, as he is chased by a drone and his car falls off from a bridge. The scene about tracking Mercer on his attempt to escape SoulSearch shows a community that is thrilled to use top notch technology together. The group of Circlers that wants to chase the dissident is not just an abstract number, they have gathered in an auditorium, they form a collective, and through their mobile phone button they have instant collective power. The power to collectively vote and decide is impacted by the emotional intensity in the hall. People cheer Mae on to press the button, voting becomes something dramatic, intense, and cathartic. However, this feeling of collective connectedness also extends the spatial partitions of the hall, the communal experience reaches deep into cyberspace. Millions of viewers livestream the event and determine Mercer's fate with their smartphone. Demoxie triggers a form of mass hypnosis, a collective experience of pleasure in seeing the instant results of voting. Democratic practice has lost its deliberative moment, the "moxie" rules. Impulse, pleasure, and speed are enabled by internet technology and have revitalized democracy. Finally, democracy is no longer a process of endless deliberation, reasoning, and rationalization, but an affective practice, which embraces emotions, joy (for the ones that are empowered), and instant recognition of the individual voice (cf. Hendriks, 2014).

The Circle portrays this affectivization of decision making, which is inherent in the model of demoxie, as a dangerous and risky endeavor. Ty, the founder of the Circle, who wants to stop his own creation and is eager to persuade Mae to start a revolution, realizes this: "Under the guise of having every voice heard, you create mob rule, a filterless society where secrets are crimes. It's brilliant, Mae" (Eggers, 2013, p. 483). The novel portrays demoxie under the auspices of a utopian community turned dystopian. When the leaders decide "to complete the circle", and that means demoxie for everybody,

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their community turns into a totalitarian society. Once the Circle closes, there is no exit any more. Although speaking the language of full inclusion and participation, demoxie becomes the facilitator of totalitarian governmental structures.

However, in portraying this dystopic imaginary of cyberdemocracy, the novel also implicitly shows how some democratic values should be protected within the digitalization of our society. On the one hand, the cybermob's chasing of Mercer (and his death) implicitly refers to that polling is a process that should not be steered by individual and collective affect. The ecstatic atmosphere in the auditorium that even ignited the virtual community lead to decisions that were taken without going through a process of reflection and common deliberation. On the other hand, the novel also suggests that democratic voting needs time; an aspect that is closely entwined with the one on filtering away the affects and personal resentments. When there is no institutional time lag between being asked a question and giving an answer, there is no time for passions to cool. Tellingly, demoxie is described as taking the "temperature" of the community (Eggers, 2013, p. 397), and this is clearly done when it is hottest.

Transparency

From the very beginning of *The Circle*, transparency and full knowledge are described as the core ideals of the company. Transparency is a goal that embodies a multitude of aspects: as the loss of a private sphere (Circlers have constant access to each other's bio data, event schedules, family histories, social interactions), as a form of transparent communication (no lies), and also on a political level, as a form of accountability. The ideal of transparency is embedded in the architecture of the company, which is placed in an open landscape and composed of glass and steel, with dizzying open constructions where you can see several flights down (Gellai, 2016, pp. 289-308). "I guess you don't put anyone with vertigo up here," the protagonist Mae jokes when shown her desk in the beginning of the novel (Eggers, 2013, p. 6). Transparency is expressed in the company's Orwellesque mottoes: "privacy is theft, "secrets are lies," and "sharing is caring."

One of the key inventions of the company is the thump sized camera, SeeChange, which can be put up and hidden anywhere and even be warn by a person. In the latter case, as with Mae,

everything she does and sees is made public to the whole world via the Circle's social media. SeeChange has the double meaning of both seeing and creating change. One of the Three Wise Men and leaders of The Circle, Eamon Bailey, describes the camera as introducing a "Second Enlightenment" (Eggers, 2013, p. 67), and as a means to protect human rights and prevent crime. When would-be human rights violators and criminals know that the world is or could be watching, this will create a world without human rights violations and crime. SeeChange promises to create instant accountability through visibility, public knowledge, and documentation. "ALL THAT HAPPENS MUST BE KNOWN" (Eggers, 2013, p. 67).

By promoting ideals of transparency, full knowledge, and accountability, the company invokes some of the core ideals of the Enlightenment, the modern, bourgeois revolutions, and liberal democracy. Ideals of publicity and common knowledge are central to the Enlightenment thought of Immanuel Kant, while accountability is a core norm of democratic thought. To hold public officials accountable for their actions, the public must know what they are doing. However, as the novel's narrative develops, we learn that transparency and full knowledge also have detrimental consequences for the health and lives of people. When everything - all movements, encounters, and conversations – are visible and audible to the public through ever present cameras that stream to the whole world via the web, there is no place and time to take a break, nowhere just to be oneself, and nowhere to hide. As anti-Circler Mercer writes to Mae in an old-fashioned letter, "You people are creating a world of ever-present daylight, and I think it will burn us all alive. There will be no time to reflect, to sleep, to cool" (Eggers, 2013, pp. 430-31). Towards the end of the novel, Mercer is driven to suicide because he cannot escape a search initiated by Mae to keep his whereabouts public and commonly known.

Although May is the company's poster child, she is also bodily affected by its dogma of transparency. She experiences panic attacks: "Mae looked down and felt her stomach cinch. She could see all the way to the ground floor, four stories below" (Eggers, 2013, p. 6). The interior and the people of the Circle are frequently described with violent metaphors. For example, "The doors opened, splitting the congressman in two" (Eggers, 2013, p. 6).

Mercer's point that "our souls need the mysteries of night" (Eggers, 2013, p. 430) sounds almost like the conservative thinker Edmund Burke's indictment of the French Revolution and Enlightenment

thought. Burke warned against overvaluing "this new-sprung modern light," or what he also calls the "conquering empire of light and reason" (Burke, [1789-90] 1987, pp. 57, 65, 67). However, rather than just being a conservative critique of new forms of light, transparency, and accountability, the novel might also be understood as a critique of a particular way of understanding these ideas. The aim of the Circle is to make *everything* publicly visible and commonly known. No discriminations are made between what is of public interest and what is not, what is of common concern and what is not. *All* that happens must be known, and it must be known by everyone. However, this is not how the publicity principle introduced by Kant and later becoming a central idea in liberal and democratic thought was applied. In this tradition, publicity has a clear object; it applies only to principles and acts that affect everyone and concerns everyone (Kant, 1992; Rawls, 1999, pp. 115, 158).

The Circle exhibits what happens to human beings when all aspects of someone's life are made public and become common knowledge, that is, known by everyone and known by everyone to be known by everyone. Mae's best friend Annie volunteers to have her past, and her family's past, investigated and known to everyone through the Circle's program PastPerfect. The revelations lead to Annie's total collapse, and at the end of the novel Annie is in a coma. The novel shows, on the one hand, how indiscriminate transparency and full knowledge of everything destroy human lives by undermining any right to privacy. But, on the other hand, it also shows how the public realm as a public realm is destroyed when overextended.

The political theorist Hannah Arendt has suggested that the public and private realms mutually depend on one another. According to her, there can "be no free public realm without a proper establishment and protection of privacy," that is, "a hiding place from the common world, not only from what goes on in it but also from its publicity, from being seen and being heard" (Arendt ,1989, pp. 66, 71). Writing in the mid-20th century, Arendt's concern is that her society fails to understand what belongs to the public and what belongs to the private realm. This has led to the "utter extinction of the very difference between the private and public realms" and their submersion under what she calls "the sphere of the social" (Arendt, 1989, p. 69). In our era of *social* media, this failure to distinguish between public and private has become even more evident. In *The Circle*, the extinction of the difference

between public and political on the one side and private and personal on the other side are drawn to its most extreme consequences (cf. Diken, 2019, p. 195).

The novel provokes reflection not only on the object and extent of publicity, transparency, and knowledge, but also on their purpose. Why and for what do we need publicity and full and shared knowledge? The SeeChange cameras, which are placed and hidden in every corner of the world and carried by enthusiastic supporters of the Circle's mission such as Mae, are mainly seen as directly affecting human behavior. Like Michel Foucault's description of the panopticon, the fact that all involved know that they are or might be watched will discipline them and make them act according to dominant norms (Foucault, 1977). This type of effect is praised by The Wise Men, because it creates "instant accountability" (Eggers, 2013, p. 66). Note that this accountability is not one that puts the relevant norms and acts under scrutiny or discussion; rather, it affects the subjected persons directly and immediately. This differs from the Kantian and later democratic notions of transparency and accountability. Here too, the acts of public officials should be open to the public. But publicity is also connected to communicability and public contestability. In the Kantian tradition, the reason why the principles behind one's actions should be publicly communicated is that they should be capable of being scrutinized and contested by the public, meaning everyone. Thus, both the Kantian and the democratic notions of publicity connect to ideals of reflection and public debate (O'Neill 1989).

In *The Circle,* we learn what happens when the connection between transparency and accountability, on the one hand, and public reflection and debate, on the other hand, is lost. Transparency of the sort created by the SeeChange cameras or surveillance technology might create a type of instant accountability, but it does not create the space and time required for reflective accountability.

The poetic structure of the novel seems to perform this argument. Already in the very beginning it is clear that there are well-kept secrets in the Circle, which only a few have access to, as indicated by Mae and Annie's visit to the library, the forbidden control room of the Circle where only the three wise men have access (Eggers, 2013, pp. 18-20). The narrative voice of the novel conveys that there is secrecy in spite of all openness. Although *The Circle* is written in third person perspective, this view is often personalized and attached to Mae's horizon. Eggers uses free indirect discourse, which is a narrative

strategy that gives insight into the person's thought by simultaneously keeping the character at distance. For example, at the end of the novel, Mae wants to read Annie's mind: "What was going on in that head of hers? It was exasperating, really, Mae thought, not knowing (Eggers, 2013, p. 491). As readers, we have insight into her thoughts, but at the same time, she also remains distant. Via this dramatic irony, we can reflect about her paranoia, misguidance, and blindness, and the novel makes us readers wiser than the narrator.

Voting

In the novel, the idea of accountability through transparency, documentation, and full knowledge precedes the proposal of changing the mechanisms or infrastructure of voting and electoral democracy. The Circle's technology, the SeeChange cameras, and social media, are first used to monitor traditionally elected politicians and make them more accountable. In the early stages of the novel, we might say, new forms of ICT are used *as a supplement* to existing democratic institutions. The surveillance cameras and the internet technology create a new type of digital public sphere that sees more, knows more, and distributes information faster. However, even if this public sphere is not differentiated from the private sphere, but is rather a type of social sphere, as discussed above, it still respects the separation between society and government or the state. A proposal introduced in the last quarter of the novel changes this. It is here that the idea of demoxie and voting through one's Circle account enters the narrative. The private company no longer provides only a public sphere of gathering and sharing information but wants to take over the administration of the democratic vote. The leaders of the Circle aim not merely to supplement representative democracy but to replace it with its own internet-based democracy.

It is interesting to follow the steps towards the emergence of the idea of demoxie in the novel. Rather than beginning with a clear and substantive ideal or end toward which the means must be found, it begins with the means, viz. the technological inventions and the infrastructure created by the company. The Circle has developed an amazingly smart technology, all-encompassing infrastructure, and almost all the citizens of the country, indeed of the world, have a Circle account. On this basis, the leaders of the company realize that it would be very easy and cheap for it to take over the government's

function of registering everyone as a voter. Indeed, an important part of their deliberations concerns cost efficiency and saving time. "I mean," Mae reasons, "we would save each user hundreds of hours of inconvenience, and collectively, the country would save billions" (Eggers, 2013, p. 390). The Circle leaders couple the focus on the means with an understanding of democratic participation as a matter of numbers. The aim of the Circle's interference with democracy is described in quantitative terms: "100 percent participation. One hundred percent democracy" (Eggers, 2013, p. 386). If the Circle can register everyone to vote, why not also provide the platform for everyone to vote? And if the goal is 100 percent participation, Mae proposes, "connect[ing] some dots" (Eggers, 2013, p. 387), why not *require* everyone to have a Circle account and make voting mandatory? The numbers have spoken, what else is there to discuss?

Realizing what the Circle *can* do for voter turnout with its technology, infrastructure, and user base, the narrative turns to the ends of doing it. Apart from the quantitative ideal of reaching 100 percent participation in voting stands the ideal of immediacy. We can understand immediacy in two different senses, both important in the novel, a temporal and an institutional one. Temporally, immediacy means without lack of time; the Circle can make voting and the result of the vote instantaneous. Institutionally, immediacy refers to a type of directness, that is, the Circle can ensure decision making without institutional mediation. The fascination with technology exhibited in the novel is an affective fascination with speed. Through the Circle's technology, you can hold a vote and get the results immediately: "*Change at the speed that our hearts demand*" (Eggers, 2013, p. 399). The aim of directness is conceptualized in the novel with the notion of the "filterless society" (Eggers, 2013, pp. 391f, 398, 482f). The goal of the Circle is "real and unfiltered … democracy" (Eggers, 2013, p. 398). This is a form of democracy in which there is nothing, no mediating institutions, between the will as expressed in an online vote and implementation. Here, internet technology is used not as supplement to existing democratic institutions but as their total and complete replacement. "If we can know the will of people at any time, without filter, without misinterpretation or bastardization, wouldn't it eliminate much of Washington?" (Eggers, 2013, pp. 391-2). Of course, complete immediacy through technology is impossible, since the technologically itself will be a form of mediation.

Other commentators and reviewers of the novel have noted how the characters are drawn into the utopia/dystopia of a new normal or a new social paradigm in a stepwise fashion (Elridge, 2015; Atwood, 2013) and that its demands are self-imposed and "reproduced with smiles and sincerity" (McManus, 2017, p. 86). However, the focus has been on acceptance of surveillance and it has been understood as a process of neoliberal economization (Diken, 2019; McNamus, 2017). As Margaret Atwood writes in her review, "the central character is manipulated, through rational-sounding questions and answers, into performing the increasingly outrageous acts that logic demands of her" (2013). However, the novel's discussion of democracy as demoxie goes beyond the issue of surveillance to the meaning and practice of democracy. Moreover, while the novel presents a stepwise rational and economic argumentation for demoxie, the characters are just as much drawn into the practice of democracy as demoxie on an unconscious and affective level. Indeed, without the affective appeal of the digital technology and its promise of instant satisfaction, the narrative intimates that the practice of demoxie would not have been so enthusiastically accepted.

The Circle as Dystopia and Utopia

The Circle can easily and convincingly be read as depicting a dystopian future and as warning against some uses of internet technology. Indeed, at the end of the novel, one of the Wise Men, the mysterious genius Ty, describes the aim of making Circle membership and voting mandatory – and "closing the circle" – as a "totalitarian nightmare" (Eggers, 2013, p. 481). Nevertheless, it is worth pausing to consider exactly what leads to this totalitarian nightmare. Exactly when does internet technology turn from enriching democracy to being a threat to democracy? Arguably, contemporary representative democracy is plagued by voter apathy and lack of accountability. Representative democracy is oligarchic and dominated by a small elite (Gilens, 2012). Young people often do not feel energized by traditional forms of participation, such as membership of a political party and voting for representatives (Foa and Mounck, 2016; Hay, 2007; Norris, 2002). *The Circle* shows how internet technology can energize particularly the youth and engage them in politics in new ways. Mae keeps to the end of the novel to insist, "I *want* to be seen. I want proof I existed" (Eggers, 2013, p. 485). Demoxie promises to fulfill her and others' desire for acknowledgment of existence and to do so directly. "*It's democracy with* your

voice, and your *moxie*" (Eggers, 2013, p. 396). Can't we profit from the knowledge and information sharing made possible by the web as well as the energy provided by its ways of doing politics, without ending in a totalitarian nightmare?

The Circle relies on a number of implicit or explicit norms and ideals. As such, it not only depicts and warns against a dystopian future, it also points to and make us aware of avenues not taken, choices not made. In particular, the novel shows how certain ideals if pursued with too much zeal, without discrimination, and with no deeper understanding of their purpose, can turn into their opposites. Energy, transparency, and voting are all good for democracy, but the novel shows that they can also destroy democracy. The line between utopia and dystopia is thin.

To what extent energy, transparency, and voting are or are not good for democracy depends on how they are channeled, organized, and institutionalized. The dystopic or totalitarian elements that are dramatized in the novel all have to do with how a private company is allowed to or allows itself to operate within society. They are consequences of the place the Circle has in relation to government and civil society. In particular, the idea of substituting moxie for kratos, energy for rule, points to the lack of understanding among the promoters of demoxie that democracy is a form of rule. As a prominent sociologist reminds us in a different context, "Democracy is a form of government, not a steam bath of popular feeling" (Dahrendorf, 2005, p. 13).

We would argue that rather than indicting the web's democratic potential as such, *The Circle* primarily warns against particular ways of organizing society and using internet technology. One interesting metaphor of the novel is the notion of closing the circle. This metaphor is in the book connected to the aim of completing democracy. But perhaps democracy never can and never should be complete - or 100 hundred percent. Democracy requires an outside, something that challenges it. The point at which demoxie turns totalitarian is the point at which the Circle encompasses everything. When the Circle closes, there are no alternative sources of information, no other places to organize, no option of opting out, no hiding places.

Pluralism is one of the norms that are presupposed in the social critique of *The Circle*. The novel indicates that democracy depends on pluralism in several respects. Pluralism in sources of information. Pluralism in ways of organizing. Pluralism in ways of life. These forms of pluralism depend on that we

uphold the distinction between state and society, and within society between the public and the private realms. It requires that the market is separated from civil society, and both are kept separate from the state and government (Cohen and Arato, 1992). The demoxie of the Circle becomes totalitarian because the Circle (a private company) does not accept the wall that separates the government and market actors like itself. It also becomes totalitarian because it absorbs all of both the private sphere and the public sphere of civil society within its empire of light, accountability, and organization. As Ty notes when looking at what is happening to the company, which he created, "I didn't picture a world … where all of government and all of life was channeled through one network" (Eggers, 2013, p. 480). In short, the warning of the novel is not so much against internet technology complementing democracy, but rather of one internet company absorbing and dominating all private and political activity. Or put differently, the dangerous turning point is the point at which the web not only supplements democratic institutions but becomes the only institution in society – knowing, organizing, and administering everything.

Conclusion

When thinking about how the web can deepen and vitalize democracy, we should not only look at what the technology can do on its own. We must also look at how the tech industry is regulated and connected to other spheres of society. We have to consider how it plays together with democracy as a form of government, which depends on a separation of state, market, and civil society. In this context, the novel places itself into democratic discourse as it refers to demoxie. Eggers does not project a digital technology into a time where people not even use the notion of democracy anymore to describe the dynamics of digital social communities. Thus, the novel is still entrenched in the Enlightenment traditions of democratic thinking and implicitly makes use of values and norms of this discourse.

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