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Digital Metrics
in the Age of Online Culture Wars
Policies of Praise and the Quest for Democratisation

Liberal societies tend to think about democracy in terms of 'what the people want'. For this reason, defenders of democratic virtues tend to idealize plebiscitary majority votes. Already in 1990's, this idea inspired the dreams of countercultural forward thinkers in the Wired milieu. Social scientists coined the concept of an emerging 'network society' that would replace the hierarchical structures of traditional institutions.[1] Leaderless digital networks of content-producers would displace the centralised organisation structures of the past. In the new information age, the government would be taken over by 'hive minds' and the 'wisdom of the crowd'.

After 2009, this cyberutopianism had a big resurgence. The green 'Twitter Revolution' in Iran, 'Arab Spring', mass protests in Spain and the middle east, the Occupy Movement, Anonymous and Wikileaks inspired commentators and journalists. The rise of social media reinforced the vision of an emerging leaderless society.[2] However, since 2016 at the latest the freedom agenda of the early internet generation has given way to an unprecedented disillusionment.[3] The left-liberal culture of the post-68 generation had become hijacked by 'alt-right' and 'alt-light' movements, which used social networks in a more efficient way than their counterparts. A new form of anti-hierarchical subversion emerged, while viral online contents from obscure sources started to outpace the leadership of journalists and other gatekeepers of civilized sensibilities. As the feminist Angela Nagle has put it: "A thousand Trump Pepe memes bloomed and a strongman larger-than-life Twitter troll [...] took the White House"[4]—no-

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[1] See Castells, Manuel: *The Rise of Network Society. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture,* Vol. I. Cambridge, Mass./Oxford, UK: Blackwell 1993.

[2] See Nagle, Angela: *Kill All Normies. Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-right.* Alresford: Zero Books 2017, 10f. For a German translation see: Nagle, Angela: *Die Digitale Gegenrevolution. Online-Kulturkämpfe der Neuen Rechten von 4chan und Tumblr bis zur Alt-Right und Trump.* Regensburg: Pustet 2018; see also: Morozov, Evgeny: *The Net Delusion. How Not to Liberate The World.* London: Penguin 2012, 1–33.

[3] Evgeny Morozow has as exposed this delusion already in 2012. In the introduction of his pertinent monograph, he epitomized the basic attitude that undergirded the utopianism of the millennium generation as follows: "Let them tweed and they will tweed their way to the future." Morozov: *The Net Delusion,* XII.

[4] Nagle: *Kill All Normies,* 3. As comparative empirical research on the media usage of contemporary populists demonstrates, Trumps use of social media is anything but 'cutting

tably in open hostility to the 'mainstream media', and the institutionalised sensibilities of the past. The cyber-dreams of the millennium generation burst asunder in the face of the online culture wars on *Twitter*, *Tumblr*, *Reddit*, and *4chan*.

It would be short-sighted to interpret this new tribalism as the simple consequence of technological innovations.[5] Technological innovations can only reinforce trends that emerge out of the cultural and institutional traditions in which they are embedded. Consequently, we have to interpret the destructive features of the digital revolution in the light of the tradition that shaped the design of these technologies—the tradition of liberalism.[6]

What can we learn from the sobering experiences of our present time about the modern idea of democratisation? In order to answer this question, we need to return to my starting problem: How can we figure out what the people want?

PERFORMATIVE ELITES AND THE ART OF ASKING QUESTIONS

Silicon Valley sages tend to adopt a solutionist attitude towards this problem. Would it not be ground-breaking, if we could determine what the people want with the speed of light, just by asking them what their response to the key questions of our time is? Imagine, a window would pop up on every user interface on this planet saying: "To save everything click here!"[7] However, solutionists ignore the moment when an individual or a group of people put forward a question. And in doings so, they distract our attention from the responsibility of those, who guide our questioning.

This problem might be illustrated by an old joke. In the early 1980's, a Franciscan nun met a Jesuit to do her daily prayer. Yet, the nun got upset because her Jesuit brother was smoking while they were praying. 'It is forbidden to do so! We asked the Holy Father, and his response was crystal

edge'. He rather uses Twitter as a kind of top-down marketing tool, and combines his propaganda with a rhetoric of immediacy that supports a populist 'usage narrative'—namely that he is 'connected to his people' and able to bypass the gatekeepers of 'mainstream media'. See MOFFIT, Benjamin: *Populism 2.0. Social media and the false allure of 'unmediated' representation*, in: academia.edu [accessed 13.12.2019].

[5] For a critical evaluation of the most recent discussion on this topic: BENKLER, Yoachi/ FARIS, Robert (et al.): *Network Propaganda. Manipulation, Desinformation and Radicalisation in American Politics*. Oxford: Oxford UP 2018, 11: "Technology does not determine the outcome or the patterns of its own adoption. Specific technologies, under specific institutional and cultural conditions, can certainly contribute to epistemic crisis."

[6] See: HOFF, Johannes: *Transhumanismus als Symptom symbolischer Verelendung. Zur anthropologischen Herausforderung der Digitalen Revolution*, in: HERZBERG, Stephan/WATZKA, Heinrich (Hgg.): *Schöne neue Welt, oder was kommt nach dem Menschen?* New York: De Gruyter 2020 (forthcoming).

[7] See MOROZOV, Evgeny: *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism and the Urge to Fix Problems that Don't Exist*. New York: Public Affairs 2014.

clear.' 'What did you ask him?' the Jesuit replied. Well, we asked him: 'Is it permitted to smoke while praying?' 'I see!', the Jesuit responded. We asked him: 'Is it permitted to pray while smoking?'"

The Jesuit way of framing the question draws our attention to the special case of 'praying while smoking'. This might be misleading, yet it is never possible to focus simultaneously on every possible fact. Pace the research of neoclassical behavioural economists, like Daniel Kahneman, there is no way to ask questions in an 'unbiased' way.[8] Our discussion about facts is always charged with values.[9] Even in scientific discussions we distinguish between what is 'essential' and what is 'negligible'. And this means in procedural terms: we put something in a perspective by distinguishing between what deserves our attention and what can be treated as background noise.

Given this inescapable fact, it would be careless to downplay the value-sensitivity of orderings that put something in perspective, as a classical political example might illustrate. In contrast to premodern Aristotelians, modern liberals tend to treat the significance of local bonds as background noise.[10] Instead of focusing on the communities that shape our everyday life, they emphasize economic growth or, in the case of left-wing liberals, non-discrimination.[11] This biased attitude represents a legitimate perspective on the totality of facts. Yet, if we pretend that it is the only possible perspective, we make significant parts of our populations feel unheard.

For this reason, it would be short-sighted to reduce the determination of the will of the people to a simple question of fact. The art of asking questions is the hallmark of human intelligence; and there is no way to relieve us from this responsibility via the algorithms of anonymous 'artificial intelligences.' Before we discuss a proposal, we must always ask ourselves the question: 'Who' is authorized to govern our questioning? And we should

[8] Neoclassical economists, like Kahneman, consider rhetorical framings as 'logically neutral' and 'description invariant'. In consequence, they interpret their undisputed impact on human decisions as a symptom of 'systematic cognitive biases' that exemplify 'predictably irrational' human behaviour. For a critical discussion of the neoclassical biases that govern this in every respect misleading interpretation of the framing phenomenon, based on a systematic evaluation of psychological research that takes account of the (superior) context sensitive intelligence of human beings see: GIGERENZER, Gerd: *The Bias Bias in Behavioral Economics*, in: *Review of Behavioral Economics* 5 (2018), 303–336, particularly 324–329.

[9] For a comprehensive discussion of the epistemological implications of this problem see: PUTNAM, Hilary: *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 2002.

[10] Michael Sandel refers to this example in his famous 2009 Harvard lectures about justice that start with an introduction to the philosophical art of questioning.
    See: https://youtu.be/kBdfcR-8hEY.

[11] As for the vanishing difference between right- and left-wing liberalism see: DENEEN, Patrick J.: *Why Liberalism Failed*. New Haven: Yale UP 2018.

be suspicious, if companies or governments pretend to replace this 'who' by a seemingly unbiased 'it'.

THE METRICS OF CLICK RATES AND THE PERFORMATIVITY OF CODES OF INDIFFERENCE

Traditionally, it was possible to trace the responsibility of those who govern our questioning back to representative gatekeepers, opinion leaders and other more or less virtuous elites. The art of asking questions was inextricably entangled with the value-preferences of 'the few'. Journalists, academics, clerics, party-politicians, or trade-unionists acted as spokesmen of the people, no matter if they agreed or disagreed with each other. Like performance artists, their representative performance provoked desire of 'the many' to articulate their own positions; and this empowered the former to represent what the latter supported or rejected. As John Milbank has put it: "people tend to want, what they are represented as wanting."[12]

However, subsequent to 9/11 we have started to delegate the role of representative guides to the rankings of surveillance-platforms.[13] This appeared reasonable, because liberal societies tend to assume that anonymous mechanisms of decision-making are 'fairer' than personalized procedures. Consequently, the performance art of gatekeepers with a face was incrementally replaced by the probabilistic performance of faceless machines.

This transformation makes our key question appear in a different light. Who decides what is essential and what might be treated as background noise? If we want to understand how online-platforms deal with this problem, we might have a look on one of their most revealing by-products: the phenomenon of 'fake news' and other forms of background noise that have moved centre-stage in our public life.

The rule of traditional gatekeepers, like journalists and academics, was ideally based on their self-conception as conversation partners. They exercised an authority in matters of truth, and this authority was honoured by acts of acclamation and praise. By contrast, the evaluation of knowledge via surveillance platforms builds not on the responsive interaction of per-

[12] I am indebted to John Milbank's outline of this problem in the following interview: http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/rn/podcast/2016/05/pze_20160508.mp3. This observation is consistent with contemporary social-constructivist theories of political representation. See LACLAU, Ernesto: *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso 2005; and DISCH, Lisa: *The 'Constructivist Turn' in Democratic Representation: A Normative Dead-End?*, in: Constellations 22 (2015) 4, 487–499.

[13] For an illuminating outline of the impact of this paradigm shift on the gate-keeper authority of journalists see: FOER, Franklin: *World Without Mind. The Existential Threat of Big Tech*. London: Jonathan Cape 2017.

formers with their audience.[14] It builds exclusively on the probabilistic analysis of user habits in the service of third parties, like advertising or credit ranking companies.

This is the background of Mark Zuckerberg famous sentence, that his users are (I apologize for the quotation) "dumb fucks".[15] The early Zuckerberg was presumably joking when he used this expression; but his association of users with vapor, smoke and other kinds of 'energetic waste'[16] reveals a basic feature of his company. *Facebook* was never a charity. It works in economic terms because it built from its very beginning on the assumption that 'users' are nothing but the behavioural rubbish of a giant recycling machine that generates 'user profiles'.

The readers of newsfeeds are no longer conversation partners. They are not customers of the relevant platforms; they are not even a valuable product to be sold. Rather, they are 'data exhaust' that can be worked up. As the Harvard business psychologist Shoshana Zuboff has argued:[17] Social media are only interested in the 'behavioural surplus' of our interactions. After all, they earn their money by recycling this surplus in the service of third parties.

[14] For a comprehensive analysis of the practices and complex interactions between the various actors of the contemporary personal data industry see: CHRISTL, Wolfie/SPIEKERMANN, Sarah: *Networks of Control. A Report on Corporate Surveillance, Digital Tracking, Big Data & Privacy*. Wien: Facultas 2017, https://crackedlabs.org/en/networksofcontrol.

[15] The following exchange took place between the 19-year-old Mark Zuckerberg and a friend shortly after Zuckerberg had launched Facebook in his dorm room: "Zuck: Yeah so if you ever need info about anyone at Harvard. Zuck: Just ask. Zuck: I have over 4,000 emails, pictures, addresses, SMS [Redacted Friend's Name]: What? How'd you manage that one? Zuck: People just submitted it. Zuck: I don't know why. Zuck: They 'trust me'. Zuck: Dumb fucks." Business Insider (5th March 2010), https://www.businessinsider.com/well-these-new-zuckerberg-ims-wont-help-facebooks-privacy-problems-2010-5?IR=T.

[16] Etymologically the word 'dump' derives from root "dheu" – "dust, mist, vapor, smoke". See https://www.etymonline.com/word/dumb.

[17] ZUBOFF, Shoshana: *Das Zeitalter des Überwachungskapitalismus*. Berlin: Campus 2018; engl. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism. The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: Public Affairs 2019. Zuboff's monograph is illuminating in terms of the broader economic and political logic that governs the liberal control societies of the post 9/11 era, but insufficient to account for the power-struggles that undergird this logic. For a more thorough discussion of this problem see: ROUVROY, Antoinette/BERNS, Thomas: *Gouvernementalité algorithmique et perspectives d'émancipation. Le disparate comme condition d'individuation par la relation?*, in: Réseaux 117 (2013), 163–196; and ROUVROY, Antoinette/STIEGLER, Bernard: *The Digital Regime of Truth. From the Algorithmic Governmentality to a New Rule of Law*, in: La Deleuziana 3 (2016), 6–29. For a thorough discussion of the insufficient philosophical basic assumptions of Zuboff's monograph see: MOROZOV, Evgeny: *Capitalism's New Clothes. Shoshana Zuboff's new book on 'surveillance capitalism' emphasizes the former at the expense of the latter*, in: The Baffler (4.2.2019), https://thebaffler.com/latest/capitalisms-new-clothes-morozov.

The spread of fake news is one of the most flagrant consequences of this 'code of indifference'[18] with regard to the concerns of the people. As a political analyst has put it: "Voices that were lurking in the shadows are now at the centre of the public discourse."[19]

In technological terms this phenomenon is easy to explain. Machine intelligences are only marginally able to grasp the quality of contents. This deficiency is a consequence of the basic material features of digital technologies and cannot be overcome by technological means alone.[20] However, while it would be possible to solve this problem by involving humans in decisive evaluation processes, this path is rarely taken. Rather, instead of focusing on the quality of contents, the dominating technologies tend to prioritise their power to attract our attention and to provoke herding effects.

The most far-reaching step in this direction was taken about 20 years ago: At the moment when *Google* developed algorithms that focused on the metrics of 'click rates'.[21] The consequent emergence of online-platforms that beat profit from 'fake news' was an un-predicted side effect of this innovation. Yet, this side effect put our whole democratic civilisations at risk. For good reasons, a parliamentary committee of the British *House of Commons* has recently urged our governments to impose a compulsory code of ethics on social media platforms.[22] However, legal steps that criminalize the spread of harmful content and disinformation can only prevent the worst. They will not change the business model of the companies that have emerged after 9/11: The most powerful corporations of our time do no longer treat the search for truth as a matter of care, but as the generator of behavioural rubbish that can be recycled.

[18] The impact of the careless processing of information by social media has been noticed already before the 2016 election. See DEL VICARIO, Michela/BESSI, Alessandro (et al.): *The Spreading of Misinformation Online*, in: PNAS 113 (19.1.2016) 3, 554–559, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1517441113; and MESSING, Solmon/ WESTWOOD, Sean J.: *How Social Media Introduces Biases in Selecting and Processing News Content*, in: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265673993_How_Social_Media_Introduces_Biases_in_Selecting_and_Processing_News_Content (8.4.2016).

[19] MOZUR, Paul/SCOTT, Mark: Fake News in U.S. Election? *Elsewhere, That's Nothing New*, in: New York Times 17th November 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/18/technology/fake-news-on-facebook-in-foreign-elections-thats-not-new.html.

[20] See SPIEKERMANN, Sarah: *Digitale Ethik. Ein Wertesystem für das 21. Jahrhundert*. München: Droemer 2019, 79ff.

[21] See ZUBOFF: *Das Zeitalter des Überwachungskapitalismus*, 583.

[22] CULTURE MEDIA AND SPORT COMMITTEE HOUSE OF COMMONS: *Digital, Disinformation and 'fake news': Final Report. Eighth Report of Session 2017–19*. London: House of Commons 2019.

The Mimetic Church of Facebook

If we want to understand the logic that governs this new type of data capitalism, we must take a closer look on its economic aims. Surveillance platforms like *Google* and *Facebook* use 'Big Data' based 'machine intelligences' to predict our behaviour. Yet, the predictive power of machine intelligences is very limited. The relevant divinations are successful only, because they assimilate our behaviour to their predictions.

This point might be illustrated by the example of Facebook. Facebook uses behavioural mechanisms like social pressure to change our habits.[23] And in doing so, it pursues an economic goal: It aims to create predictable consumer behaviour that is consistent with the algorithmic fortune telling of a highly volatile finance capitalism.[24]

This 'tuning' and 'herding' strategy might be exemplified by *Facebook*'s 'Like' button, which was introduced in 2009.[25] If we praise a photo in *Facebook* or *Instagram* by clicking a 'Like' button, self-learning algorithms will analyse our behaviour. Yet, the relevant algorithms will not focus on the content of the photo or video we have just praised. Rather they will assess our 'like history', rank how much we 'like' the people whose photo we praised, compare our click-habits to the click-habits of other members of the herd of users, etc. The algorithms of Facebook build on no less than 100.000 parameters. Yet they are only marginally interested in contents. They are primarily interested in creating predictive certainty via procedures of nudging, gagging, manipulating and behavioural conditioning.

The social dynamics of such procedures becomes evident if we pay attention to the most important psychological feature of social platforms: their tendency to enforce competitive behaviour. Platforms like *Facebook* explore our behaviour, for example, by testing how mechanisms of social pressure cause us to assimilate to our peers. Or its algorithms analyse the anxieties we might display via our online behaviour in order to figure out how it can be reshaped. If you are, for example, a passive user, who frequently pushes 'Like' buttons without doing postings by herself, the relevant algorithms might classify your mental health as fragile; and if you make frequently status-updates, they might assume that you are at the brink of a depression. Consequently, Facebook might conclude that your behaviour can be 'modified' via emotionally charged message and adverts— e.g. by posts that make you cry or smile. If, by contrast, you are an alpha animal that does a lot of creative postings, you might be manipulable via

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[23] Zuboff calls them technologies of scaled behavioural modification that are designed to 'normalise' our behaviour. See ZUBOFF: *Das Zeitalter des Überwachungskapitalismus*, 437–511.

[24] For the following see also: STIEGLER, Bernard: *States of Shock. Stupidity and Knowledge in the 21ˢᵗ Century*. Cambridge: Polity Press 2015.

[25] See ZUBOFF: *Das Zeitalter des Überwachungskapitalismus*, 524–528.

'priming procedures'—for instance by showing you a series of images in a statistically tested, well selected order.

Seen from this angle, social networks are like giant Skinner boxes. Originally, skinner boxes were used in laboratories to study animal behaviour based on mechanisms of behavioural conditioning. Social platforms have expanded this laboratory on a global scale. Yet, in contrast to traditional Skinner boxes, they focus not on rats who a craving for food, but on 'users' who are craving for social connections.

Since social creatures have an intuitive desire for glory and praise, the 'Like' button has turned into one of the most powerful tools of these digital 'herding' and 'tuning' procedures. As a young app-designer has put it: The Like button is "the crack-Cocaine of our generation".[26] However, other than in our analogical environment, the acts of glory and praise that we distribute via digital platforms are frequently poisoned. The most important 300 empirical studies on the relationship of social media and psychological well-being show that resentful processes of social comparison and mimicry are the dominating mechanism of social networks.[27]

Against this background, it might be argued that René Girard sinister theory of social mimesis has become true in the artificially created world of social networks at the very moment when it has turned out to be questionable in anthropological, historical and ethnological terms.[28] It might be no accident that Facebook was co-founded (in the role of the first outside investor) by Girard's most influential student, the libertarian Silicon

[26] ZUBOFF: *Das Zeitalter des Überwachungskapitalismus*, 525.

[27] HAFERKAMP, Nina/KRÄMER, Nicole C.: *Social Comparison 2.0. Examining the Effects of Online Profiles on Social-Network Sites*, in: Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking 42 (2011) 3, 9–14; https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/cyber.2010.0120; APPEL, Helmut/GERLACH, Alexander L./CRUISIUS, Jan: *The Interplay Between Facebook Use, Social Comparison, Envy and Depression*, in: Current Opinion in Psychology 9 (2016), 44–49, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2015.10.006.

[28] For a critical historical and ethnological discussion of Girard's theory see: GOODE, Leslie: *Re-evaluation of the Relationship between Christian Salvation Event and 'History of Religions' Sacrifice. An Appraisal of Theological Options*. London: PhD Dissertation 2017. Girard's anthropology builds on the assumption that the integration of our embodied self is constituted via intersubjective practices of social mimesis. This theory was widespread in the 20th century and shared by thinkers as different as Jacques Lacan, G.H. Mead and Hans Joas. However, in the light of more recent empirical, neurocognitive and anthropological research it has proved unsustainable. See FUCHS, Thomas: *Leib, Raum, Person. Entwurf einer phänomenologischen Anthropologie*. Stuttgart: Klett-Kotta ²2018, 129f. Mimetic Practices, which manifest themselves in intersubjective acts of joint attention, are derivative to holistic, prereflexive resonance relations, and in this sense ontogenetically and phenomenologically secondary. See also: FUCHS, Thomas: *Das Gehirn als Beziehungsorgan. Eine phänomenologisch-ökologische Konzeption*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer ⁵2016, 192–228; engl. FUCHS, Thomas: *Ecology of the Brain. The Phenomenology and Biology of the Embodied Mind*. Oxford: Oxford UP 2018, 173–209. As for the theological significance of this discussion see: HOFF, Johannes: *The Analogical Turn. Re-thinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2013, 101–115.

Valley billionaire and Donald Trump supporter Peter Thiel.[29] The psychological logic that governs our use of 'Like buttons' reinforces the modern tendency to undermine authentic modes of creativity: It privileges compensatory, mimetic types of activity, and depletes the vital forces that shape our ability to act in a responsive, non-competitive way.[30]

Seen from this point of view, the *Facebook* 'Like-button' is exemplary for the technological reinforcement of trends that emerge out of the cultural and institutional traditions in which they are embedded. It shows us—within the framework of a giant laboratory experiment—what is wrong with the modern 'image of man'.[31] Hence, it might not be surprising that the negative side-effects of the use of 'Like' buttons in social networks overweight its benefits on a large scale.[32] The 'smileys' that contextualise our

[29] See FELONI, Richard: *Peter Thiel explains how an esoteric philosophy book shaped his worldview*, in: Buisiness Insider (10.11.2014), http://www.businessinsider.de/peter-thiel-on-rene-girards-influence-2014-11?r=US&IR=T.

[30] As Max Scheler has pointed out already in 1916, negative types of competitive 'careerism' are symptomatic for the modern perversion of authentic modes of creativity. The latter actualise themselves in a positive sense of ability and a vital pleasure in the power to act. For this reason, they are only secondarily accompanied by the desire to imitate (or compete with) 'heroes'. This distinguishes them from inauthentic, compensatory types of creativity, which produce at most feeble imitations. See SCHELER, Max: *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik. Neuer Versuch der Grundlegung eines ethischen Personalismus.* Halle: M. Niemeyer 1921, 357–367, particularly 367 Anm. 1.

[31] See SPIEKERMANN: *Digitale Ethik*, 162ff.; and HOFF: *Transhumanismus als Symptom symbolischer Verelendung.*

[32] PRZYBYLSKIA, Andrew K./MURAYAMAB, Kou: *Motivational, Emotional; Behavioral Correlates of Fear of Missing Out*, in: Computers 29.4 (2013), 1841–1848, https://doi.org /10.1016/j.chb.2013.02.014; KROSS, Ethan/VERDUYN, Philippe (et al.): *Facebook Use Predicts Declines in Subjective Well-Being in Young Adults*, in: PloS ONE 8.8 (14.8.2013), https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0069841; KRASNOVA, Hanna/WENNINGER, Helena (et al.): *Envy on Facebook: A Hidden Threat to Users' Life Satisfaction?*, in: 11th International Conference on Wirtschaftsinformatik. Leipzig: WI 2013, 1477–1491; SAGIOGLOU, Christina/ GREITEMEYER, Tobias: *Facebook's Emotional Consequences: Why Facebook Causes a Drease in Mood and Why People Still Use It*, in: Computers in Human Behavior 35 (2014), 359–363 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.03.003; TANDOC, Edson C. Jr./FARRUCCI, Patrick: *Facebook Use, Envy, and Depression Among College Students: Is Facebooking Depressing?*, in: Computers in Human Behavior 43 (2015), 139–146, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.10.053; LEE-WON, Roselyn J./HERZOG, Leo/PARK, Sung Gwan: *Hooked on Facebook. The Role of Social Anxiety and Need for Social Assurance in Problematic Use of Facebook*, in: Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking 18 (2015) 10, 567–574, https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2015. 0002; MANAGO, Adriana M./WARD, Monique L.: *Facebook Involvement, Objectified Body Consciousness, Body Shame, and Sexual Assertiveness in College Women and Men*, in: Sex Roles 72 (2015) 1–2, 1–14; LIU, Quin-Xue/LI FANG, Xiao: *Need Satisfaction and Adolescent Pathological Internet Use. Comparison of Satisfaction Perceived Online and Offline*, in: Computers in Human Behavior 55 (2016), 695–700, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.09.048; LÖNNQVIST, Jan-Eric/GROßE DETERS, Fenne: *Facebook Involvement, Objectified Body Consciousness, Body Shame, and Sexual Assertiveness in College Women and Men*, in: Computers in Human behavior 55 (2016), 113–120, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.09.002; ELHAI, Jon D./LEVINE, Jason C. (et al.): *Fear of Missing Out, Need for Touch, Anxiety and Depression Are Related to Problematic Smartphone Use*, in: Computers in Human Behavior 63 (2016), 509–516,

use of these buttons are highly ambiguous. Yet, this does not stop digitised 'glorification buttons' from functioning as a highly efficient tool. The desire for rewarding dopamine cookies and the fear of social exclusion clearly overweight the psychological pain that 'Like' buttons cause. As a tool of mimetic bonding, is has become one of the most powerful control-mechanisms of the digital empires of our time. It wields 'users' together in interdependence and empowers digital companies to create substitute-churches. After all, the declared goal of social platforms like Facebook und Instagram is to create a universal ecclesial community. To use Zuckerberg own words: he wants to provide "all of us with a sense of purpose and hope; moral validation that we are needed and part of something bigger than ourselves".[33]

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ORTHODOX AND IDOLATROUS ECONOMIES OF PRAISE

We might call the mechanisms that govern this new type of collective tuning, herding and conditioning an 'economy of praise'. Yet, in contrast to analogical economies of acclamation and praise, the 'Big Data' based churches of our time do not care about the difference between authentic ('orthodox') and inauthentic ('idolatrous') practices of devotion. It is no accident that the behavioural technologies of social platforms have been developed, tested and refined over long periods in the slot machine industry: They create a parasitic symbiosis between man and machine, and aim to generate addictive dependency behaviours.[34]

Psychological studies show that social networks manufacture anxieties, feelings of social insecurity, depression, obsessive-compulsive behaviour, the inability to be alone, and the pathological 'fear of missing out' which has been termed 'FOMO'.[35] Moreover, the relevant studies show that these effects hamper the formation of a stable identity in adolescence and emerging adulthood.[36] To use are more traditional expression: the social network

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.05.079; LIU, Jiangmeng/LI, Cong (et al.): *Do Our Facebook Friends Make Us Feel Worse? A Study of Social Comparison and Emotion*, in: Human Communication Research 42 (2016) 4, 619–640, https://doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12090; PRIMACK, B A./SHENSA, A. (et al.): *Social Media Use and Perceived Social Isolation Among Young Adults in the U.S*, in: American Journal of Preventive Medicine 53 (2017) 1, 1–8; ARGO, Taylor/LOWERY, Lisa: *The Effects of Social Media on Adolescent Health and Well-Being*, in: Journal of Adolescent Health 50 (2017) 2, 75–76, DOI: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.10.331; SHAKYA, Holly B./CHRISTAKIS, Nicholas A.: *Association of Facebook Use With Compromised Well-Being: A Longitudinal Study*, in: Am J Epidemiol. 185 (2017) 3, 203–2011, https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kww189.

[33] ZUCKERBERG: *Supportive Communities* (16th February 2017) https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/building-global-community/10154544292806634/; see also ZUBOFF: *Das Zeitalter des Überwachungskapitalismus*, 588.

[34] See ZUBOFF: *Das Zeitalter des Überwachungskapitalismus*, 515–520, 531f.

[35] See above Fn. 33.

[36] See ZUBOFF: *Das Zeitalter des Überwachungskapitalismus*, 520–528.

technologies of our time undermine our ability to become untroubled individuals who are able to stand in silence before God.

In contrast to such late-modern economies of praise, I have focused in my earlier research on one of the last representatives of premodern economies: Nicholas of Cusa.[37] Already in his first work, *The Catholic Concordance*, Cusa investigated the significance of practices of acclamation and praise for ecclesial and political procedures of consensus formation.[38] In his later, more philosophical writings, Cusa came repeatedly back to this topic, for example when he argued that the gifts of the divine light are participated in by virtuous leaders in a "theophanic"[39] way. As a matter of wonder, glorification and praise, the 'glory' of Christ is supposed to shape the thoughts and actions of every social body that is properly ordered. And this means in practical terms: every true process of consensus formation has to be marked by collective practices of acclamation and praise. The glory (*doxa*) of Christ has to become manifest via practices of glorification (*doxazein*).

More recently, this feature of premodern practices of consensus formation has been investigated in particular by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Agamben is right to emphasize that the cultivation of policies of glory was not an exclusive feature of pre-modern societies: „Contemporary democracy is a democracy that is entirely founded on glory that is on the efficacy of acclamation, multiplied and disseminated by the media beyond

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[37] As for the phenomenological foundations of my research on doxological practices see: HOFF, Johannes: *Mystagogy after the Displacement of Modern Science and Culture. Looking back to Post-modernity with Nicholas of Cusa*, in: MORITZ, Arne (ed.): *A Companion to Nicholas of Cusa*. Leiden: Brill 2021 (forthcoming). I have unpacked the philosophical and theological implications of the 'doxological turn' of this belated publication in the following writings: HOFF, Johannes: *The Analogical Turn. Re-thinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2013, part III; HOFF, Johannes: *Iconicity and the Anamorphosis of Social Space. Retrieving Nicholas of Cusa's Political Pneumatology*, in: VERGAUWEN, Guido/ STEINGRUBER, Andreas (Hgg.): *Veni, Sancte Spiritus! Theologische Beiträge zur Sendung des Geistes. Contributions to the Mission of the Spirit*. Münster: Aschendorff 2018, 424–470; and HOFF, Johannes: *Liturgical Turn: Gottesrede in einer post-digitalen Welt*, in: SCHMIDINGER, Heinrich/VIERTBAUER, Klaus (Hgg.): *Glauben Denken. Zur philosophischen Durchdringung der Gottesrede im 21. Jahrhundert*. Salzburg: Tyrolia 2016.

[38] The first volume of this book is dedicated to ecclesiological questions in the narrower sense, the second develops a theory of councils, the third engages with the reform of the empire. For an English translation see: NICHOLAS OF CUSA: *The Catholic Concordance*. Ed. and translated by Paul E. Sigmund. Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press 1991.

[39] *Varietatem autem intelligentiarum varie unissimam veritatem theophanice participantium cum mediationis diversitate. De coniectures.* Hamburg: Mainer 1972, II, c.13 n.137, 9–10.

all imagination."[40] But to what extent are these late-modern practices of glorification still democratic?[41]

RESSOURCEMENT AND THE QUEST FOR DEMOCRATISATION

Agamben builds on Eric Peterson's research about the practice of acclamation in the early Christian *ecclesia*.[42] Nicholas of Cusa was familiar with this early Christian practice and tried to recover it as a source of democratisation. For the same reason, he shared the desire for democratisation with late medieval predecessors of modern liberalism. However, he disagreed with them about the way to this goal. The proto-liberal tradition reduced "Church government to a balance of power between [...] individual forces."[43] By contrast, in Cusa the agreement of the faithful was as a vital fruit of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit moves through "holy desires" that inspire "decisions of life".[44]

According to this view, processes of collective decision making are never reducible to a matter of rational calculations about power balances between competing forces. Functionless practices of acclamation and praise are essential for democratic procedures of decision-making and never reducible to a mere background noise.[45] If we do not put such practices centre stage, our democracies become soul- and careless.

Hence, Cusa's theology confirms Agamben's thesis that our modern liberal democracies fail "to confront the decisive political problem".[46] As Agamben has argued, the wheel of political activities does not turn around biological, economic, or social concerns, but around seemingly function-

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[40] GIORGIO, Agamben: *The Kingdom and the Glory. For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government* (= Homo Sacer II, 2). Transl. by L. Chiesa with M. Mandarini. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press 2011, 256.

[41] For a balanced overview of the recent discussion on political acclamation, including a discussion of the emergence of a new type of acclamation in the social media see: MITCHELL, Den: *Political Acclamation, Social Media and the Public Mood*, in: European Journal of Social Theory (2016), 1–18.

[42] See PETERSON, Erik: *Heis Theos. Epigraphische, formgeschichtliche und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zur Antiken 'Ein-Gott' Akklamation*. Würzburg: Echter 2012. See also the afterword by Barbara Nichtweiß, ebd. 609–642, and PETERSON, Erik: *Ekklesia. Studien zum altchristlichen Kirchenbegriff*. Ed. by Barbara Nichtweis and Hans-Ulrich Wiedemann. Würzburg: Echter 2010. For a constructive, critical assessment of Peterson's ecclesiology in light of contemporary research on his biblical sources: WEIDEMANN, Hans-Ulrich: „*Paulus an die Ekklesia Gottes, die in Korinth ist*". *Der Kirchenbegriff in Petersons Auslegung des ersten Korintherbriefs*, in: CARONELLO, Giancarlo (ed.): *Erik Peterson – Die theologische Präsenz des Outsiders*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot 2012.

[43] MILBANK: *Being Reconciled*, 128.

[44] *Confortas me spiritu sancto tuo, inspiras per eum electiones vitae, desideria sancta. De visione Dei*. Hamburg: Mainer 2000, c.25 n.119, 2–3.

[45] See *De concordantia Catholica*. Hamburg: Mainer 1968, III, n.353, n.366 and n.435.

[46] See AGAMBEN: *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 276.

less practices of acclamation and glorification.[47] There can never be an "economy of power" without a "liturgical apparatus" that is governed by an "economy of glory".[48]

However, responsive practices of acclamation and praise become inauthentic if we instrumentalise them in the service of mega-companies, or in the service of competitive religious, confessional and political identity policies. And this leads me back to my starting point: to the performance art of virtuous authorities, gatekeepers and opinion leaders.

We have unlearned to cultivate the responsive relationship between authentic leadership and democratic practices of will-formation, because we have unlearned to cultivate practices of acclamation, honour and glorification in a non-calculating and non-competitive way.[49] For a long time, the work of gatekeepers, public authorities and opinion leaders was a matter of honour. Party politicians, academics, bishops, or representatives of public media, skilled trades, NGO's, and trade unions endeavoured to fulfil their tasks because it was honoured as a matter of public concern that had an incalculable life and dignity of its own. This was the tacit soil on which modern democracies thrived. Yet, since no one cared about this soil, no one was prepared to resist the unpredicted side effects of badly designed media technologies that promoted the unfettered dissemination of simulacra of honour and praise. While the work of journalists and academics became increasingly governed by anonymised assessment and ranking procedures, the globalized accumulation of idolatrous 'Likes' in *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *YouTube* turned our democracies into soul- and careless machines that served as the breeding ground of rivalling tribes.

However, I have not only serious doubts that the tradition of liberalism has the resources to cope with this challenge. I have also serious doubts that the ecclesial traditions of modern Christianity are prepared to cope with this challenge. If we want to cultivate game-changing alternatives to the idolatries of our time, we need to develop better IT-technologies and disempower the market forces that nourished the growth of monstrous surveillance platforms like *Facebook*, *Google* and *Instagram*. Yet, that alone will not solve our problems. We also need to deflate the idolatrous forces that have turned political, academic and ecclesial practices of appreciation and praise into the control-mechanisms of religious, confessional and political identity policies. To put it succinctly, we need a Ressourcement that is consistent with the mind-set of proto-modern thinkers like Nicholas of Cusa. But his would be the topic of another essay.

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[47] See AGAMBEN: *The Kingdom and the Glory*, XII, 245, and 251.

[48] AGAMBEN: *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 201

[49] For a more thorough discussion of this problem see: HOFF, Johannes: *Die Rückkehr zur Realität: Freundschaft, Politik und Spiritualität in einem post-faktischen Zeitalter*, in: Communio 46 (2017) 3, 299–312.

Abstract

Since the 1990's the digital revolution has inspired the prophecies of Silicon Valley pundits that we are about to enter a leaderless society. Yet, the cyber-utopian excitement about the 'wisdom of the crowd' has given way to an unprecedented disillusionment since 2016 at the latest. If we want to learn from this sobering experience, we must face the decisive problem: Every democracy is founded on practices of acclamation and praise. Social networks like Facebook have turned such practices into a manipulative tool that undermines the democratic pursuit of the true and the good and reinforces competitive mimetic habits. What can we learn from the premodern cultivation of practices of worship and praise if we want to overcome the life-threatening crisis of contemporary democracies?