

“First Days of a Better Nation”

Technology and Activism in Cory Doctorow’s Writing for Young Adults.

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It has been hinted at before that Cory Doctorow’s work constitutes a strong correlation between activism, literature and authorship. In their article “Return of the Hacker as Hero” Debra Dudek and Nicola F. Johnson remark that the technological information given in *Little Brother* leads to a blurring of “the boundaries between Marcus’s fictional world and the hacking world that informs the novel” (188). Robert P. Fletcher in his article “The Hacker and the Hawker: Networked Identity in the Science Fiction and Blogging of Cory Doctorow” even proposes that Marcus, the protagonist of *Little Brother*, “echoes Doctorow the cyber-activist” (94) and thus assumes conformity between the characters’ and the author’s views. Asked in an interview about the parallels between science fiction writing and activism Doctorow explains:

[A] science fiction writer can take something that is very diffused, technology that’s kind of all around us, whose effect is being felt in lots of different ways and sort of plug that one fact out of the world and build a world in a bottle, a thought experiment world in which that’s the one totalizing fact about world. Not as a prediction and not as a model but rather as a kind of diagnosis. [...] [I]n the technological world an activist’s job is to try to call peoples’ attention to some of these changes and to advocate for decisions in technology design and specific ways of using technology, to try and influence the direction that technology is headed and society is headed [...]. And if an activist does her job right it conjures up some of the same technological diagnosis that a science fiction writer can conjure up. So these are really related activities in my mind. [...] They are highly complementary activities. (Ford 00:59–02:28)

Taking into account these proposed similarities between science fiction writing and activism, Doctorow’s novels and their depiction of technology can arguably be regarded as an integral part of his role as an activist. His books seek to inform readers and invite them to understand the importance of technology in their society. More than that, however, they want to make them change it. In his afterword to Doctorow’s

novel *Homeland*, former WikiLeaks spokesperson and online activist Jacob Appelbaum explains the purpose of the text:

Cory asked someone to write to the children of the newest generation and to say something to inspire them. To write something that would encourage them to take up the cause for bettering the world. (Doctorow 2013a, 383)

Doctorow's writing for young adults is not only part of an activist's effort to "advocate for decisions in technology design and specific ways of using technology" (Ford 01:46–01:52) but also aspires to produce readers who themselves become advocates of a better society.¹ By looking closely at *Little Brother* (2008), *For The Win* (2010), *Pirate Cinema* (2012), *Homeland* (2013) and *Lawful Interception* (2013) I intend to show which concepts of society the books mark as desirable and what role technology plays in these evaluations.²

"This Stuff is Real"

In the second afterword to *Homeland*, internet activist Aaron Swartz sums up the relationship between Doctorow's novels and the extra-textual world with the simple phrase "This stuff is real" (Doctorow 2013a, 387). The fact that the books have been deliberately designed to allow this conclusion becomes clear at several points. For one, the 'thought experiment' worlds they portray seem remarkably close to our current one, creating the impression that the topics discussed are both relevant to current politics but still influenceable. In this respect all five novels offer slightly changed fictive versions of debates about new media that are important for society today. *Pirate Cinema* sketches a society where the government can cut off a whole household from the internet if one member infringes copyright laws. So when Trent's family's internet connection is suspended because he remixed and published video material he did not own the copyright to, it affects his whole family: His father loses his job and his sister's

¹ In November 2012, WIRED magazine published an interview/podcast with a title reflecting that sentiment: "With *Pirate Cinema*, Cory Doctorow Grows His Young Hacker Army".

² In doing so, this approach leaves aside or ignores questions about what this close entanglement of political program and literature production means for the figure of the author as meaning producing center inside the text as well as the activist author as author of young adult literature. This absence of a discussion of how these novels function inside the wider 'power' structure of young adult literature is related to this article's focus on images of technology and society and not due to a general ignorance of the importance of such a discussion.

access to study material is being compromised. The law in question here is the Digital Economy Act which has been in effect in ‘realworld’ Britain since 2010. The novel draws attention to the idea that as life gets more intertwined with the internet, those not interested in copyright laws, because they do not work with video material or do not watch videos online, may find that these laws will still influence their lives in a few years. In *Little Brother*, protagonist Marcus Yallow aka M1k3y finds himself entangled in the political aftermath of a terrorist attack on the Bay Bridge in San Francisco. The novel depicts the slow decline of the Bay Area into a surveillance state and the fight of Marcus and his friends against this development. The statements of the Department for Homeland Security in the book, propagating the loss of freedom and privacy as justifiable and necessary sacrifices for a supposedly more secure country, are direct echoes of post 9/11 politics. This is underlined by the invocation of the “changed everything” tagline that has been central to cultural evaluations of the impact 9/11 had on western society. “You need to understand that the bombing of the Bay Bridge changed everything” (Doctorow 2008, 210), Markus’s father tells his son, thus drawing a direct line between the Bay Bridge bombing and the debates following the attack on the World Trade Center. In *Homeland*, the sequel to *Little Brother*, Marcus is entrusted with a huge amount of sensitive data, “the keys to decode all the ugliest secrets of the American government” (Doctorow 2013a, 36). Among other topics, the story traces the problems that are connected to owning and publishing such information. *Homeland* reflects on the public controversy regarding Chelsea Manning and the publications of her documents by WikiLeaks but is also relevant for the discussion about Edward Snowden’s revelations about the National Security Agency.

In depicting real life debates, the novels offer patterns for handling current political events. They further invest in making the reader understand their context by inserting extensive information. In this manner *For The Win* explains bonds, arbitrage, inflation, gold-farming and ponzi schemes; *Little Brother* elaborates on cryptography, ParanoidLinux, TOR (The Onion Router), Alan Turing and the crypto wars, and *Homeland* gives an introduction into Darknets, Noisebridge, Bit-Torrent, random numbers and making good coffee. Additionally, both, *Little Brother* and *Homeland*, offer bibliographies for further reading. Doctorow’s novels do not, however, seek solely to inform but aim at the readers applying this knowledge. “This book is meant to be

something you do, not just something you read” (Doctorow “Read This First“, 2), Doctorow remarks in his foreword to the free PDF version of *Little Brother*. “So close the book and go. The world is full of security systems. Hack one of them” (Doctorow 2008, 369), writes security expert Bruce Schneier in an afterword to *Little Brother*. These statements are bridging the gap between fiction and reality by extending the actions of the novels’ protagonists via the hoped-for future actions of its readers. The goal, as Jacob Appelbaum describes it, is a better world:

Be the trouble you want to see in the world, above nationalism, above so-called patriotism, above and beyond fear and make it count for the betterment of the planet. Legal and illegal are not the same as right and wrong – do what is right and never give up the fight. (in Doctorow 2013a, 386)

A brighter future, this seems to suggest, is based on communion, on closing the book and, instead of just reading about it, engaging in its making.

Novels about Doers

The five novels discussed here offer several examples for the better society invoked by the afterwords of *Little Brother* and *Homeland*. One of the strongest models for an ideal society is the Burning Man Festival as described by Marcus on the first pages of *Homeland*:

Fifty thousand people show up in this incredibly harsh, hot dusty environment and build a huge city – Black Rock City – and *participate*. ‘Spectator’ is a vicious insult in Black Rock City. Everyone’s supposed to be *doing* stuff and also admiring everyone else’s stuff [...]. That’s another thing about Burning Man: it runs on a gift economy, which means that you generally go around offering nice things to strangers a lot, which makes for a surprisingly pleasant environment. (Doctorow 2013a, 11, emphasis in the original)

The reference to the harsh surroundings in the desert already hints at the fact that in the imagination of this novel it is possible to overcome severe conditions by working together – to build a city on dust. Teamwork, active participation and the idea that everyone provides for everyone else constitute reoccurring themes in Doctorow’s writing for young adults and serve as role models for behavior evaluated as positive and desirable by the novels. In *Homeland*, Marcus recounts how he helped up fellow demonstrators after they had been attacked with teargas:

I started grabbing the people on the ground around me and helping them to their feet. I had no idea where Ange was, but if she was one of those people thrashing in their own vomit on the ground, I hoped that someone was helping her up. (Doctorow 2013a, 304)

The implied logic is that if everyone tries to stand by those in need, chances are that everyone is taken care of. In *Pirate Cinema*, protagonist Trent, after having left his parents' home, struggles to survive on the streets of London. He meets Jem, who shows him where to find food others have thrown away. Even though Jem has no money to buy groceries he gives a lot of the food he collects to other poor people who do not know how to provide for themselves. In *Little Brother*, the X-netters, the activists around Marcus, play a game called Clockwork Pirate in which the game avatar is powered by clockwork and needs to be wound up. The players cannot wind themselves up but need other players' help to do so. "[T]here was something magic about a stranger doing you a favor" (Doctorow 2008, 135), Marcus remarks while thinking about the dynamics of the game.

Although these novels feature technophile characters and center around new media, at its core the attitude they promote is not about technology but active help. In the short novel *Lawful Interception*, an earthquake hits Oakland. Marcus narrates: "So when the Seneca quake hit, we dusted ourselves off and did what you do: we went to see how we could help" (Doctorow 2013b, Loc 19). After arriving at the scene, Marcus and Ange help to bring order into the chaos:

While I'd been in Oakland, I'd been part of something bigger: I'd been helping people and they'd been helping me. [...] [I]t was also the chance to live like it was the first days of a better nation, a place where every person you met was your brother or sister, where you did what needed doing because it needed doing. (Doctorow 2013b, Loc 83)

What Marcus experiences is the fulfilment of creating a kinder society. Part of his revelation is connected to the simplicity that is the power of purposeful acting. "So what do we do to start doing something?" (Doctorow 2013b, Loc 158), Marcus asks one of the Occupy Seneca activists. Acting turns into the most crucial investment in the coming of a better nation, the fundament for progress towards improvement. This idea is present in *For the Win* as well. Here, underground radio host Jiandi tells her audience, exploited Chinese factory girls, that they only think of their small problems

but never question the system: “We never ask what we can do” (Doctorow 2010, 290). In the same book, Yasmin and Ashok discuss the possibilities of helping their friends in China: “All I can do is what I can do,’ Yasmin said, ‘What can you do? What can economists do’”? (Doctorow 2010, 190). Yasmin’s question draws attention to the fact that helping is bound to someone’s personal abilities. ‘Do what is in your power’ might be the message. Given the choice between acting and not acting, Doctorow’s main characters always choose action. So although the novels offer a lot of information about technology, politics and economy and thus try to enhance the scope of their readers’ actions, the most important attitude they promote is simply being a ‘doer’, someone who wants to be part of a solution. These are novels about political activists, hackers and union leaders. The most impressive example of their positive influence can be found in the depiction of three online activists who fight for a workers’ union for gold farmers³ in *For the Win*. They are hospitalized after being beaten up severely but

they wouldn’t stay in their rooms. Instead, they kept sneaking down to the hospital’s cafeteria, where they’d commandeer three or four tables, laboriously pushing them together, moving on crutches and wheelchairs, then spread out computers, phones, notepads. (Doctorow 2010, 259)

Although they are barely able to walk, instead of resting, they immediately find a place to gather, rearranging the cafeteria space to fit their purposes, and restart their efforts. After they find out that some of the nurses have been beaten by their employers, their leader, Big Sister Nor, even holds “consciousness-raising meetings” and teaches them how to “write official letters of complaint to the Ministry of Manpower” (Doctorow 2010, 259). This short passage shows quite clearly the transformative power ascribed to people who act and care. They are bettering the world around them. Technology plays two very important roles in this fight for and vision of a better nation: It is at the same time mindset and tool, a pattern for how a society should work and the means to reach this future.

³ Gold farmers are gamers who professionally play online computer games in order to level up characters or collect game currencies and attain special weapons. These are then sold to other players who do not want to invest time in attaining these goods themselves.

The Power of the Enemy

Doctorow's characters are threatened by powerful and often very physical forces. Accordingly, all novels contain vivid descriptions of assaults on the main characters. In *Little Brother*, Marcus is abducted by soldiers of the Department of Homeland Security:

[S]omeone put a coarse sack over my head and cinched it tight around my windpipe, so quick and so fiercely I barely had time to gasp before it was locked on me. I was pushed roughly but dispassionately onto my stomach [...]. I cried out and my own voice was muffled by the hood. (Doctorow 2008, 40)

Throughout the novel, Marcus will be treated even worse. He will be deprived of food, denied access to a bathroom, so that he repeatedly soils himself, and finally he is almost subjected to waterboarding. In *Homeland*, Marcus and Ange are teargassed by policemen during a demonstration and Markus is beaten up by men who want to pressure him into giving them the information on the American government he hides. Marcus's description of his opponent underlines his physical inferiority: "He was a good six inches taller than me, broad-shouldered, and the muscles on his forearms and wrists stood out in cords and masses like a superhero drawing" (Doctorow 2013a, 182). In *For the Win*, the display of sheer brutality reaches its peak in Matthew's description of the workers' strike:

Somewhere nearby, shouting. Lots of shouting. Boyish yells of terror and agony, the thud of clubs, screaming from the balconies, no words, just the wordless slaughterhouse soundtrack of thousands of Webblies being beaten. (Doctorow 2010, 407)

While some of the children are hit with clubs, others are shot by the police: "The boys leapt to their feet and *charged*, warriors screaming their battle-cries, unarmed children scared and brave and stupid, and the police guns fired, and fired and fired" (Doctorow 2010, 419, emphasis in the original). By repeatedly using words like "boyish", "boys" and "children", the impression of the police's savagery is increased. At the same time, the inappropriateness of the state's reaction becomes even more apparent.

Besides their physical superiority, companies and governments have access to the media and to lawmakers. They are thus, on the one hand, able to actively shape the

public perception of the activists' cause via channels widely assumed to be trustworthy judges of what is right and wrong. On the other hand, this means that they are able to, as Doctorow calls it, terrorize "dissidents and the powerless with threats of terrible punishments" (2013c, 23). In *Pirate Cinema*, the homeless teenager Trent has 15,232 charges brought against him for remixing videos and posting them online and is sued for an unimaginable sum of 78 million pounds. Additionally, the movie studios succeed in influencing Parliament to pass a new law – TIP, the Theft of Intellectual Property Bill. Because of this new law, several teenagers go to prison for copyright infringement. One of them is Jimmy Preston, a mentally challenged boy who has downloaded 450,000 songs because he liked cataloguing them. After being sentenced to five years in prison the boy hangs himself in his cell.⁴ "Of course they were guilty. The law had been written to *make them guilty*" (Doctorow 2012, 150), Trent asserts. The book draws attention to the imbalance between offence and penalty when it comes to Copyright Laws⁵ as well as to the problems that arise when companies influence legislation. It further implies a basic scepticism when it comes to trusting laws to preside over what is right and wrong behavior and highlights the distinction Appelbaum makes between lawfulness and morality.

On Becoming Superhuman

Doctorow's novels depict worlds that threaten their teen protagonists with the physical and legal power a state or capitalist company can wield over them. In an article in *The Guardian*, Cory Doctorow writes that "technology isn't necessarily good for freedom [...] it can be used as readily to enslave, surveil, and punish as it can to evade, liberate and share" (2011). He remarks, though, that technology has a tendency to be "in favour of the dissidents" because of the fact that the technology available to the oppressors is now also available to the oppressed (ibid.). People can now "encipher their messages to

⁴ In January 2013, three months after *Pirate Cinema* had been published, internet-activist Aaron Swartz hung himself in his apartment. He had been prosecuted for allegedly illegally mass-downloading academic articles from JSTOR and had been threatened for this with 35 years in prison. Aaron's own assertion from his afterword in *Homeland* that "This stuff is real" (Doctorow 2013a, 387) comes to the forefront in this scene in the saddest way possible.

⁵ Again, the events in the novel directly hint at real life legislation. In "I Can't Let You Do That Dave" Cory Doctorow explains the Digital Millennium Copyright Act and asserts that "if you're convicted of illegally unlocking your phone, you face the potential of greater penalties than if you were convicted of turning it into a bomb" (Doctorow 2013b, 23).

an extent that they cannot be deciphered by all the secret police in the world” and are able to “go head-to-head and toe-to-toe with the state’s propagandists on the same internet” (ibid.). This positive evaluation can be felt throughout all of Doctorow’s texts for young adults. Firstly, these novels introduce cyberspace as an empowering alternative to the physical world: Physical factors lose their impact and as a result, so do the brutal methods of the opponents. This is explored in *Little Brother* where Ange, Marcus’ girlfriend, proposes to hold an online press conference in the Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game called Clockwork Plunder. The news reporters all have to log into the game and come to a place in the virtual world of the game, moving around as avatars inside the game. Meeting in the realm of the game limits the possible actions of the participants and also secures Marcus’s anonymity. In *For the Win*, a group of activists, the Webblies, tries to fight for better working conditions for gold farmers. In order to win people over for their cause, they go online into the game worlds and talk to the avatars of the workers while these are playing the game. “This was a *lot* more fun than being teargassed” (Doctorow 2010, 122, emphasis in the original). Big Sister Nor, their leader, remarks: “Why risk your neck in the factory or standing at its gates when you could slip right in among the workers, no matter where they were in the world, and talk to them about joining up?” (Doctorow 2010, 122) The direct difference between the safety of being online and the powerlessness of being in the physical world makes itself felt when Big Sister Nor is put into hospital a few pages later.

Along with empowering those with less physical strength, the books present the ability of the internet to connect a large amount of people as essential to forming a counter-force. “But we’ve got to think like dandelions here” (Doctorow 2013a, 228), Marcus tells his friends in *Homeland*. The reproductive strategy of the dandelion is embodied in the People’s Mic. The People’s Mic, a signature ‘real-world’ Occupy movement tool, is used by the demonstrators in the novel to hold speeches. The words of the person talking are being repeated by those standing around them. Then the next row of people repeats the words and so on until the words of that one person have been carried through the whole crowd. The internet now makes it easier to coordinate working together in that way. In *For the Win*, the narrator explains what the ‘Coase Cost’ is. Organization, she says, “is a kind of tax on human activity” (Doctorow 2010, 238). The time it costs to coordinate people constitutes the Coase Cost. Now if there is

a way to reduce this cost in a manner that transcends “the limitations that nature has set” then one becomes “superhuman” (Doctorow 2010, 241). Marcus in *Lawful Interception* offers another analogy for the superpower that is the internet – an orchestra:

‘But if you’re playing with other people, you’ve got to, you know, pick a song, pick a key, pick a tempo. Spend a lot of time listening to the rest of the band and making sure everyone’s playing at the same time. But you do it, because playing six or ten instruments at once, and doing a good job of it, that’s more than one person can do.’

‘It’s superhuman, in other words,’ Ange said.

‘Exactly. So cooperation with other people gives you superhuman powers literally. But it costs something.’ (Doctorow 2013b, Loc 555)

The internet, these novels imply, makes it possible to create a community of people larger than has ever been possible before and to use this superhuman power to fight the forces that threaten and limit it. “The Coase cost”, the narrator in *For the Win* explains, “of demanding better pay, better working conditions and a slice of the pie just got a *lot* cheaper” (Doctorow 2010, 242, emphasis in the original). The enormity of the internet’s capability to unite humans reaches its peak in the voices of the gamers that join together to back the strikes of the Chinese gold farmers. Meeting online, they transgress national borders and language barriers. Talking to Big Sister Nor, Mala realizes the presence of the other gamers on the chat channel:

In her headset, she heard the ragged breathing, the curses in six languages, the laughter and shouting of players all over the world, listening to her rap out commends in all the different versions of Mushroom Kingdom that they were fighting in. (Doctorow 2010, 122)

The group virtually spans the whole world. Its efforts, as Appelbaum demands it in his afterword to *Homeland*, “move above nationalism” (Doctorow 2013a, 386). They are, as one character calls them, a “United Nations of players” (Doctorow 2010, 247). The connectivity of the internet also allows the activists to make the world a witness to the things that are happening to them. In *For the Win*, the protesters are described as “armed with bricks and rocks and camera phones” (Doctorow 2010, 426). As is mentioned several times throughout the novel, the videos of the strikes are moving around the world. “You saw me on the internet in America?” asks one of the gold-

farmers in China. “Every gamer in the world saw you, Lu” (Doctorow 2010, 201), his US-friend Wei-Dong informs him. “They’ve got water cannons. They’ve got gas. We’ve got code, sensors, drones and an audience” (Doctorow 2013b, Loc 742), Marcus says in *Lawful Interception* and thus clearly marks the internet and technology as ultimately on the side of the weaker party.

The Hacker Mindset

The internet and technology are presented as tools for improving the world. Additionally, they are an integral part of the new society envisioned by the novels. Hacking is essential for understanding the connection between technology and society. In “A Short History of ‘Hack’”, Ben Yogoda explains that out of the eight definitions for ‘Hacker’ in the 1975 dictionary for programmers, *The Jargon File*, only one referred to a hacker being an evil data thief. According to the first of these definitions, a hacker is

[a] person who enjoys exploring the details of programmable systems and how to stretch their capabilities, as opposed to most users, who prefer to learn only the minimum necessary. (Yogoda 2014)

This definition is doubly interesting for an examination of Doctorow’s writing because it serves as a metaphor for thinking about technology as well as society, a doubling that can be found in these five novels as well.

Many of the texts’ main characters are very tech-savvy. Marcus only owns laptops he has built himself. In *Homeland*, he also spends a lot of time at Noisebridge, a hackerspace that is filled “with lathes and lasercutters and work benches and drill presses” (Doctorow 2013a, 70). There he tries to find a way to build a 3-D printer that can print images out of playa dust. Aziz in *Pirate Cinema* owns a shop for used computer parts and builds a computer for Trent. Here ‘exploring the details’ makes itself felt in the energy invested by the characters to understand technology and work with it. The idea of fully investigating a system can also be found in Trent’s concept of originality: “Originality is just combining things that no one ever thought to combine before” (Doctorow 2012, 160). When Trent remixes movies into new ones, his work really pays attention to the details of the originals while simultaneously giving new meaning to them. Big Sister Nor in *For the Win* also ‘stretches the capabilities’ of the

system that is online gaming when she uses it as a tool for recruiting union workers. These characters explore systems, materials, laws and technology. Building things from parts, customizing technology, using software that was not developed by big companies but independent hackers is a reoccurring theme and can very well be regarded as a central metaphor for the relationship hacker/ state, hacker/economy. Be it their computers or the laws they are urged to live by, people with a hacker mindset do not buy the prepared package, the controlled and fixed content. In doing so, hackers subvert power by rearranging content as they think is most effective or logical. This is where hacker, state and economy collide: while the latter two are setting limits in the form of laws and regulations, the former one is trying to overcome these in order to explore all the details of the given concept. In Doctorow's novels, this engagement is tied back to a propagated usefulness for society. As Andrew Huang explains in his afterword to *Little Brother*:

Any complex system is sport for a hacker; a side effect of this is the hacker's natural affinity for problems involving security. Society is a large and complex system, and is certainly not off limits to a little hacking. (in Doctorow 2008, 371)

Society here turns into a 'programmable system'; as a consequence, hacking society and political involvement coincide. In her book *Coding Freedom*, Gabriella Coleman quotes a Linux coder who talks about the difference between working with open source software instead of the constricted applicability of Windows software: "The constraints were no longer arbitrary; they were limited by your technical abilities, knowledge, desire to push deeper" (36). Doctorow's image of a better future conveys an ideal of society and politics as working like open source software, software that can be changed and adapted and is not protected by copyright laws. "Code is speech" (8), Coleman writes and thus draws attention to the correlation between coding/copyright laws and freedom of speech/restrictions of free speech. States and companies set 'arbitrary' limits that keep humanity from fully unfolding its potential and constrain the right to free speech. *Little Brother* in particular understands hacking as a metaphor for questioning established rules and the narratives that are being deployed to justify these rules. Talking about the Enigma code, which the Germans used to cipher their messages in WWII, Marcus explains:

And the more [the British] thought about it, the more they realized that anyone can come up with a security system that he can't figure out how to break. But *no one* can figure out what a smarter person might do. You have to publish a cipher to know that it works. You have to tell *as many people as possible* how it works, so that they can thwack on it with everything they have, testing its security. The longer you go without anyone finding a flaw, the more secure you are." (Doctorow 2008, 99, emphasis in the original)

What makes a security system better is trying to trick it, not trying to follow it. Accordingly, society constantly needs to allow itself to be hacked in order to improve. After the attack on the Bay Bridge, the Department of Homeland Security starts to record the movements of the people of San Francisco with the help of their metro cards to be able to detect 'abnormal' travel patterns. The Xnetters then start to copy peoples' metro card chips and swap people's data, thus creating unusual traveling patterns all over the city. The goal is to undermine the narratives of the Department of Homeland by showing, that if teenagers can do this, terrorists could easily manipulate these security measures as well. The security measures are thus revealed to be useless. Instead of acting on this information, though, Marcus Society needs to be hacked: *Little Brother* and the Xnetters are now regarded as terrorists, as they are 'sabotaging' the security system. Here the basic rift between hacker thinking and state power is exemplified. Marcus breaches the system to show where it doesn't work in order to make the system better, while the state is depicted as relying on unquestioned centralized power. Dudek and Johnson compare Marcus's deeds to Bourdieu's acts of resistance as they are performed "to resist 'norms' imposed on them by hegemonic forces" (189). Taking into account the hacker mindset, however, I propose that the activism depicted here is as much about questioning and improving as it is about resisting and is only labelled as 'resistance' to criminalize it. Hacking becomes a metaphor for an ideal society, a society that democratizes knowledge in order to guarantee the best possible system – A society that is not afraid to discuss its bugs, where 'resistance' is encouraged.⁶

⁶ It would probably prove fertile to compare this vision of society in detail with Foucault's idea of power, which already incorporates resistance as an integral force.

Age

Although the basic political agenda of these novels is not interested in age, Doctorow ties many themes back to it. As I have hinted at before, cyberspace empowers its users because it offers immateriality. In *For the Win*, it further empowers users by making age irrelevant. This manifests itself in the characters of Mala and Yasmin, two poor Indian girls. In-game both command huge armies and Yasmin in particular becomes an important figure in the union workers' fight. Still, seeing Yasmin in real-life for the first time, economist Ashok exclaims: "You – you're just a little girl!" (Doctorow 2010, 177). Her being a child is the first thing he notices. The word "just" underlines the immediate connection he makes between her 'childness' and a status of weakness. Standing on her own at a train station. Yasmin remarks on being eyed by some Hindu boys:

Mostly, it didn't touch her, because mostly, she only met people who knew her and whom she knew or people who were entirely virtual and who cared more about whether she was an Orc or a Fire Elf than whether she was a Muslim. But here, on the edge of the known world, she was a girl in a hijab, an eye-slit, a long, modest dress, and a stout stick, and they were all *staring* at her. (Doctorow 2010, 169, emphasis in the original)

Gaming erases Yasmin's age, her religion and her gender. The performativity and ties connected to all three become all the more obvious when consciously contemplating the real world as a physical space.

As teenagers, the protagonists also have to deal with more forces that set them limits and control them than adults would. In *Little Brother*, Ange thus explains:

I don't know how to know who to trust, but I know who *not* to trust: old people. Our parents. Grownups. [...] They forget what it's like to be our age. To be the object of suspicion *all the time!* (Doctorow 2008, 165, emphasis in the original)

Being young entails being the object of surveillance by parents and institutions alike. This phase thus overlaps with being a citizen in the societies the novels depict. To teenagers technology is both a way to evade grown-ups and fight the system and a tool for being controlled by adults and institutions. In *Little Brother* Marcus uses gravel he puts in his shoes to fool gait recognition software, thus proofing the security system to be flawed, while at the same time freeing himself of the school's control over him.

Equally telling is Wei-Dong's escape from his father in *For the Win*. Wei-Dong's father is angry with his son because he spends more time gaming than studying and wants to send him to a military school. Wei-Dong uses his first chance to escape. During his escape he avoids CCTV cameras and throws away his phone so that the police will not be able to track him using GPS. Security equipment, technology and the possibilities they offer to monitor him intertwine with the threat of being pulled back under his father's power. These systems become the extended arm of the father.

Conclusion

Doctorow's novels are important because unlike many current academic discussions they do not engage in an overall evaluation of whether children's and teenagers' contact with technology should be encouraged. Technology in these novels is a given in modern society, as are gaming and the internet. To a certain extent, the novels romanticize hacking and activism and the communities they inspire. Still, the main characters' problems with technology are at times very basic and the 'dangers of the internet' are not occluded. In *Homeland*, Marcus's computer is hacked and he is being spied on with the camera built into his laptop. Furthermore, *Little Brother* acknowledges the existence of online predators. "Of course every gamespace was full of pedos and pervs, and cops pretending to be pedo- and pervbait" (Doctorow 2008, 135), Marcus remarks after a stranger asks weird questions online. Paranoia in regards to technology is generally not criticized but encouraged. The novels thus neither glorify nor demonize technology. The responsibility here lies with the user and the solution to these threats, the novels propose, is education. As Marcus explains in *Little Brother*: "Teaching people how to use technology is always exciting. It's so cool to watch people figure out how the technology around them can be used to make their lives better" (Doctorow 2008, 266). It is in the hands of the users to acquire the knowledge necessary to turn technology into a positive force. By being handed the necessary information the readers are offered a chance to control technology. This knowledge, though, is meant to be used. Technology's empowering features allow the readers to turn into influential activists and shape their society. In this regard these novels are manuals for rebellion as well as guides to breaking the law and are thus very unusual for young adult literature. This involvement, however, is strongly linked to critical

thinking, political engagement and taking responsibility. Even though the novels hint at the positive features of cyberspace, they do not prefer cyberspace over the physical world. The main characters of these books go to demonstrations, strike, organize political rallies and talk to politicians. They expose their identity and, as Doctorow describes in *The Guardian*, risk “bodily harm in service of a moral cause” (2011). In that sense, these novels offer power but at the same time, maybe because of their idealistic and romantic stance, promote responsibility, morality and accountability. At their core they are about human collaboration and the creation of a society that does not restrict it – a better nation.

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