

**From Transparency to Tyranny: Decoding Digital Totalitarianism**  
**in Dave Eggers' *The Circle***

**Dissertation**  
**In**  
**English Language and Literature**

**University of Kerala**  
**Thiruvananthapuram**  
**July 2025**

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Dissertation Submitted to the University of Kerala in Partial  
Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of the Degree of

**Master of Arts  
In  
English Language and Literature**

**Examination Code : 53022402**

**Subject Code : 530**

**Course Code : EL 545**

**University of Kerala  
Thiruvananthapuram**

**July 2025**

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## Preface

In an era where transparency is praised as the hallmark of progress, accountability, and democratic virtue, the idea itself has morphed stretching beyond ethics into obsession. The digitized world we inhabit, from social media feeds to biometric tracking, thrives on visibility. But what happens when visibility transforms into surveillance, and connectivity becomes coercion?

Dave Eggers' *The Circle* (2013) offers a mirror image of our daily digital experiences, helping us to imagine what it would be like to live in a society of total transparency, and to experience the gradual loss of autonomy. *The Circle* tells a story about the human condition in the info era, the ideology of the digital culture, and the political structure which serves it. It could help us see in real time the social implications of digital technology, identify the forces that come into play, and design more concrete strategies to address them.

The dissertation entitled "From Transparency to Tyranny: Decoding Digital Totalitarianism in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*" is a humble attempt to explore the broader implications of digital totalitarianism on society and individual autonomy, and how these platforms benefit from user data and control behavior through specific mechanisms. The study raises serious concerns about the ethical implications of digital monitoring, the erosion of privacy, and the commercialization of human experiences. Through close reading and contextual analysis, this project decodes the narrative strategies Eggers employs to dramatize these tensions and considers their implications for our own society. By mapping the trajectory from idealistic openness to

authoritarian control, this project aims to equip readers with a critical lens for interpreting digital culture.

This project is divided into four chapters. The first chapter titled “Introduction” gives a brief account about Dave Eggers, his style of writing and recurrent themes. The second chapter titled, “Panopticon Reimagined” provides an overview about intersections between digital totalitarianism and surveillance culture through the lens of techno-dystopian fiction, highlighting how imagined futures mirror emerging real-world trends in authoritarian control and data exploitation. The third chapter, “Soft Power and Subtle Coercion” investigates how corporate-led surveillance and algorithmic governance contribute to a culture of coercion, thus framing a nuanced vision of digital totalitarianism. The final chapter, entitled “Conclusion”, traces *The Circle*’s descent into algorithmic tyranny, juxtaposing it with present-day technologies that erode boundaries between self and system. This project concludes with a call to awaken and reassert human agency against mechanisms that quietly dictate behaviour.

# Chapter One

## Introduction

Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.

– George Orwell, *1984*

In an era defined by digital interconnectivity, Orwell's observation cuts to the heart of our contemporary struggle with privacy. Once, a secret simply a matter of concealing something from someone, but in this age, it requires digging deeper within oneself - a personal censorship that curtails expression before hostile technological and corporate scrutiny. With every digital interaction being tracked and recorded, people are forced to engage in self-censorship, erasing random ideas and impulses out of concern that even their most private musings may be subject to exploitation. This pernicious internalization of surveillance is indicative of a broader cultural change in which people constantly negotiate their personal boundaries while under the relentless gaze of technology and corporate oversight.

Dystopian narratives have long explored this transformation, which portrays the cautionary tales of totalitarian governments and corporations that require both internal and external compliance. In this sense, George Orwell's *1984*, which depicts a society where people are forced to police their own thoughts by intrusive state mechanisms and constant surveillance, is still a classic. Today's issue is the growing fear of the technology and mechanization of the dehumanizing societal control of the future community, as seen in Orwell's *1984*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, or H. G. Wells' *The Island of Dr.*

*Moreau*, which attempts to maintain complete control over values like privacy, autonomy, and individuality.

Today the technological are so sophisticated that it is possible to keep an eye on every aspects of life and it became much easier to anticipate the potential human behavior before it proceeds to action. In contrast to Orwell's *1984*, which depicts the panopticon way of using force to monitor people for the objectives of punishment and discipline, people in contemporary dystopia do not complain about being monitored. They are willing to expose their most intimate moments to public spaces. Dave Eggers's *The Circle* is one of the most dramatic examples for the readers of this kind of dystopia. Published in 2013, the novel was a howling success.

Dave Eggers' novel *The Circle* dives deep into the contemporary realm of corporate power and digital totalitarianism. In this narrative, keeping a secret becomes a personal struggle against a system that infiltrates our minds and forces us to hide even from ourselves. The journey of digging into one's private life becomes a necessary survival tactic in a world that glorifies constant visibility as the ultimate goal, ultimately blurring the lines between being controlled from the outside and submitting from within. This thesis examines the pervasive surveillance culture, the relentless assertion of corporate dominance, and the ensuing digital totalitarianism and erosion of personal autonomy as starkly depicted in Dave Eggers' provocative techno-dystopian narrative, *The Circle*.

Dave Eggers' cautionary contemporary dystopian novel *The Circle* thrusts readers into a digital age where the alluring promise of endless connection comes with the heavy cost of lost privacy and individual freedom.

This isn't just a story about a tech giant reshaping social interactions; it's a powerful examination of how today's society struggles with the thin line between freedom and surveillance. As we follow Mae Holland, a young woman caught up in the rapid ascent of a corporate giant, we're prompted to reflect on the consequences of living in a world where transparency can be both a blessing and a curse. Mae's journey—from an eager newcomer to just another part of an all-seeing machine—echoes the inner turmoil many of us face in a tech-driven society. Eggers uses striking symbolism and a well-crafted narrative to critique the tech industry's utopian promises. The Circle itself becomes a compelling character—a manifestation of modern corporate power that blurs the boundary between benevolent innovation and invasive surveillance.

*The Circle* follows Mae Holland, a young and ambitious woman of 24 year old who lands a job at the Circle, a powerful tech company that has essentially monopolized the world's digital services. This powerful conglomerate has completely changed how people connect, communicate, and share their lives. At first, Mae is captivated by the company's sleek, utopian campus and the promise of endless connectivity. However, as she gets deeper into the corporate world, she starts to feel trapped in a culture that values total transparency over personal privacy. As she climbs the corporate ladder, The Circle's invasive policies begin to blur the lines between her public and private life, revealing a disturbing shift from empowerment to surveillance. Through Mae's experiences, the novel ultimately warns against a future where humanity is sacrificed on the altar of transparency. Readers are left to question how far the boundaries of privacy can stretch. Thus Dave Eggers raises profound inquiries about modern society.

Dave Eggers stands out as a groundbreaking American writer, editor, and activist. His work breaks traditional limits mixing personal stories with sharp social observations. His wide-ranging career covers unique novels moving essays, and forays into screenwriting which all explores the layers of identity, technology, and community in 21st century. His literary trajectory is marked by a willingness to bare the soul of modern life—from personal memoir in works like *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* to the speculative edges of dystopian fiction seen in *The Circle*. Eggers' stories strike a balance between easy-to-read language and deep often troubling critiques of society. Dave Eggers was born in 1970 in Boston Massachusetts, and grew up in Chicago's rich suburbs. Raised in a family where education and intellectual curiosity were highly valued, Eggers's early life was steeped in the nuances of American life, which would later serve as a backdrop to his literary explorations. His personal tragedies—the loss of both parents at a young age—became the crucible in which his narrative voice was forged.

Eggers transformed his personal grief into a form of literary expression that resonated with a generation grappling with loss, identity, and responsibility. Eggers attended the University of Illinois, where he found that writing provided an outlet for processing complex emotions and experiences. He spent much of his legacy on founding magazine called *Might* in 1994. *Might* published just sixteen numbers and never hit a circulation number of more than thirty thousand but achieved a cult following and popularity for being wit, savvy media satire, and irreverence. By 1997, however, the magazine had folded, and Eggers finally made progress on his memoir, the ironically titled *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. The book recounts his life with his brother, the rise and fall

of Might, Eggers's efforts to get a place on MTV network's reality show *The Real World*, and Eggers's efforts to overcome the loss of his parents. More significantly, Eggers demonstrated his loyalty to postmodern culture, as writers such as David Foster Wallace have defined it, by structuring the memoir in innovative and humorous ways. Throughout the book, Eggers repeatedly steps back from the story being told in the memoir to analyze both the events being related and his methods, motives, and techniques in relating them. The work's candid, self-reflective tone, combined with its postmodern narrative techniques and dark humor, set Eggers apart from his contemporaries and established him as a voice willing to experiment with form and content.

The poignancy of the story, combined with Eggers's satirical and self-conscious shirking of convention, won excellent reviews from publications including the *New York Times Book Review*, *Booklist*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Time*. Furthermore, the *New York Times* listed *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* as one of the best books of 2000, and it was chosen as a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2001.

He launched the literary magazine *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* as a hardbound quarterly journal largely given to printing postmodern and experimental literature; almost immediately, writers with countercultural cachet began publishing in *McSweeney's*. Eggers also became a noted advocate for literacy and writing, forming several nonprofits and workshops to support aspiring authors and editing the Best American Nonrequired Reading anthology series. Eggers's rapid rise to popularity resulted in the inevitable backlash; websites dedicated to jokes or less-than-flattering stories about him proliferated. However, his status continued to grow, aided in part by his actions at readings

and benefits. Continuing to write, Eggers produced works of both fiction and nonfiction over the subsequent years that would earn him critical acclaim and several honors. His writing is deeply rooted in the intricacies of human experience, yet it is unafraid to lay bare the ways in which progress can be a double-edged sword.

In his adventurous novel, *You Shall Know Our Velocity* (2002) Eggers follows two friends on a globe-trotting journey that is both a physical and metaphorical quest for meaning. The narrative interweaves humor, philosophical introspection, and keen observations on friendship, materialism, and the ethics of altruism, transforming travel into a mirror for inner discovery. Through its blend of spirited adventure and thoughtful inquiry, the work examines how movement and shared experiences can lead to profound personal transformation, resonating with modern readers who seek both escapism and depth in the narrative of life.

His book *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* (2006) provides a fictionalised account of the life of a Sudanese man following the decimation of his family's village during the Sudanese Civil War. After immigrating to the United States, Deng felt it was necessary to tell his story. Yet Deng was only taking beginners writing classes at Georgia Perimeter College, and he wanted a more adept writer to do his life's story justice. A friend put Deng in contact with Eggers, and the two embarked on a years-long relationship where Deng described a lifetime of torture and hardship.

By blurring the boundaries between fact and creative storytelling, the book powerfully explores themes of human suffering, resilience, and the global interconnectedness of political and humanitarian crises. Its empathetic portrayal

of an individual's struggle amid widespread conflict has not only raised awareness about the refugee experience but also challenged audiences to see personal tragedy as part of a larger, systemic narrative of injustice.

*Zeitoun* (2009), a true story of a New Orleans man's ordeals in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, earned an American Book Award. This book tells the true story of Abdulrahman Zeitoun, a dedicated Syrian-American businessman in New Orleans who, during Hurricane Katrina, chooses to stay behind while his family evacuates, devoting himself to saving neighbors and rescuing stranded animals amidst the catastrophic flooding. His courageous actions, however, lead him into a confrontation with governmental authorities driven by racial profiling and institutional bias, thus highlighting the multifaceted themes of the narrative. The book scrutinizes the destructive impact of prejudice, underscored by Zeitoun's immigrant identity, while also critiquing governmental incompetence and systemic failure that transform acts of personal heroism into narratives of injustice. Moreover, it explores the paradox of the immigrant experience in America, a blend of profound resilience and vulnerability and invites reflection on how societal structures can undermine the inherently noble impulse to help others in times of crisis.

*A Hologram for the King* (2012), a novel depicting a man's struggle to support his family during global economic hardship, was a finalist for the National Book Award in 2012. It follows Alan Clay, a disillusioned and financially ruined American businessman in search of redemption, as he journeys to Saudi Arabia on a desperate bid to secure a lucrative government contract by pitching a cutting-edge holographic projection system to King Abdullah; his struggle amid cultural misunderstandings, bureaucratic inertia,

and an alienating modern corporate world underscores themes of personal reinvention, the clash between traditional values and globalization, and the existential quest for meaning and connection in an increasingly fragmented world. Eggers's narrative was well received by critics and was nominated for an Andrew Carnegie Medal in 2013; it was also a finalist for the National Book Award for fiction in 2012. The novel was also adapted to the screen in 2016 by Lionsgate and starred Tom Hanks as the main character.

Eggers's later novel *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?* (2014) is the story of a 'methodical and non-violent' guy called Thomas, who is seeking the answers to some big questions in his life. In order to facilitate these enquiries, he chloroforms personally significant people from the local town, kidnaps them and then chains them to posts inside separate rooms in a vast disused military base overlooking the Pacific Ocean. As further questions arise and as the story expands, so too does the need for new captives. Thomas is able rigorously to insist (with the threat of his Taser where necessary) that his prisoners tell him the truth. And so one deposition leads into another until Thomas starts to feel that things 'are really clarifying' for him.

Interestingly, the novel consists solely of the interviews that Thomas conducts and is therefore written only in dialogue. Every scene is set inside the base and we can glean nothing of the wider story except that which comes to us naturally through what is said in these duologues. We gradually realise that this story concerns the police killing of a half-Vietnamese boy, Don Bahn, Thomas's best childhood friend. Meanwhile, the wider thematic concern of the novel is plangently evident from the implications of the title, which is a quotation from the Book of Zechariah in the Old Testament, but which can be read as Eggers's

macro-inquisitorial lament for what he perceives to be the decline in American purpose, direction, backbone; the disappearance of the American dream.

His novel *Heroes of the Frontier*, published in the year 2016 follows Josie and her kids, five-year-old Ana and eight-year-old Paul, as they crisscross Alaska, they nickname the Chateau. Along the way, they visit family in Homer, squat in an abandoned ranger's cabin, and outrun a series of wildfires. They make campfires, explore the woods barefoot, and stalk deer in the forest. Ultimately, their experiences in nature are the catalyst for their own self-realisation. Eggers uses the trio's escapades and the characters they encounter to explore and make provocative commentary on wide-ranging themes: The American identity, our society's relationship (or lack thereof) with nature, and the United States' astounding appetite for violence. And while the book sifts through weighty topics, at its heart *Heroes of the Frontier* is a story about adventure and the personal growth that can come from it. Eggers' writing in *Heroes of the Frontier* combines humorous elements with introspective passages. The novel has been described as reimagining the classic American man-vs-wilderness adventure, recast with a female protagonist. The novel's title is noted to be partly ironic but mostly sincere in its promise, echoing Eggers' approach in his earlier work, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*.

He also released *The Monk of Mokha* (2018), a nonfiction account of one man's attempt to rekindle the coffee industry in Yemen. Departing from his typical fictional and dystopian explorations, *The Monk of Mokha* (2018) weaves together historical research and vibrant travel narrative to tell the story of a Yemeni activist determined to resurrect his country's fading coffee industry. This non-fiction book explores the revival of cultural heritage in the face of

modern globalization and economic challenges, highlighting the transformative power of personal ambition on national identity. By connecting rich historical context with the dynamism of contemporary economic forces, Eggers crafts a narrative that not only revives interest in a traditional craft but also offers a hopeful perspective on how cultural and economic revitalization can serve as an antidote to global homogenization.

Eggers' minimalist and experimental short novel *The Parade* (2019) showcases a whiff of pedagogy in the prose. Two men, Four and Nine, have been assigned to pave a road in an unnamed country recovering from civil war. Four is an experienced, by-the-book type, concerned only with meeting his deadline before a celebratory parade. Nine is a reckless newbie, neglecting cautions against eating local food, swimming in a local river, and carousing. Eggers ably weaves in a host of ethical questions over one man's responsibility to the other, what makes help transactional versus simply kind, and whether the road itself will truly bring safety and progress to the provinces at seventy miles an hour. Eggers is determined to counter the notion that social and economic improvement work hand in hand, and Four and Nine ultimately resonate as characters as much as archetypes. An unassuming but deceptively complex morality play, as Eggers distills his ongoing concerns into ever-tighter prose.

*The Captain and the Glory* (2019) is a biting satirical novella set aboard a ship called the Glory, symbolizing the United States. The ship, previously led by a respected captain, falls into disarray after the arrival of a new captain, who is viewed as lacking in competence and integrity. The new captain's reckless actions, favoritism, and lack of competence put the passengers and crew at risk, while a group of dissidents known as "The Kindly Mutineers" strive to oppose

his leadership. Eggers draws parallels between the President Donald Trump, with allegorical figures such as the Captain's daughter serving as a stand-in for Ivanka Trump, and "Paul the Manafort" and "Michael the Cohen" representing key Trump associates. The plot follows the new captain's ascent, abuses of power, and eventual escape during a mutiny, reflecting the unstable political climate during Trump's presidency. The novel utilizes a fable-like narrative style characterized by simple prose and exaggerated characters to deliver a political critique and addresses themes of authoritarianism, cronyism, and the potential consequences of unchecked power. Eggers employs absurdist humor to shed light on contemporary politics and its ethical challenges. The book's allegorical structure encourages readers to draw parallels between the ship's fate and the state of American democracy during the Trump administration. While the story offers criticism of Trump, it also raises broader concerns about the vulnerability of democratic institutions in the context of populism. The novella garnered attention for its timely critique and Eggers' signature style of mixing humor with social commentary.

Eggers released the short story *The Museum of Rain*, in 2021 which became the first installment of an ongoing project called *The Forgetters*. Eggers published additional stories in the series in 2023 and 2024. He released a series of humor books with his younger brother, beginning with *Giraffes? Giraffes!* in 2003. Eggers' first children's book, the self-illustrated *When Marlana Pulled a Thread*, appeared in 2011. It was followed by the better-received *The Bridge Will Not Be Gray* (2015), which began a string of collaborations with various illustrators. These included *Her Right Foot* (2017), *The Lifters* (2018), *What Can a Citizen Do?* (2018), *Tomorrow Most Likely* (2019), and *Faraway Things*

(2021). *The Eyes and the Impossible* (2023) was awarded the prestigious Newbery Medal. Eggers also published *Moving the Millers' Minnie Moore Mine Mansion* (2023) and *Soren's Seventh Song* (2024). Beyond books, Eggers also helped to write screenplays, such as *Away We Go* (2009) and *Where the Wild Things Are* (2009). He contributed the story for the 2012 film *Promised Land*, starring Matt Damon, and worked on the screenplays for film adaptations of his books *A Hologram for the King* and *The Circle*.

*The Circle*, which was published in the year 2013, was adapted as a film starring Tom Hanks and Emma Watson that appeared in 2017. A sequel to *The Circle*, *The Every*, was published in 2021. This novel portrays the story of a woman named Delaney Wells who joins the Every, a company formed by a merger between the Circle and an e-commerce giant known as "the jungle" (a thinly-disguised version of Amazon). Wells feels the company is too powerful, and she joins with the intent of destroying it from the inside. The novel critiques the ethical compromises of innovation, questioning whether the technological progress is worth sacrificing human rights and authentic connections.

In his interview with *BOMB* Magazine on the publishing of his novel *The Every*, Eggers replies to the question regarding the ethical questions about Big Tech and free will. In Eggers' words,

"I'm an advocate for using technology and not being used by it. I've been startled over the last thirty years to see just how dramatically that power dynamic has been flipped—how tech companies insist on an a very strange relationship: to use their products, you have to agree to a long-term relationship that's almost feudal—you pay them continuously, but you never own anything. And meanwhile, they're

going to be tracking everything you do. It's like being in a relationship with a very controlling, needy, obsessive person. You're never free; you're always paranoid. You're simultaneously on a leash and under a microscope. But there's been very little pushback to any of this. So, we have these monopolies whose power grows every day, because we continually feed them. All the power they have is power that we've given them."

At the heart of Eggers' literary and thematic universe is his dystopian style of writing—a genre that both encapsulates the speculative as well as the political dimensions of contemporary society. His dystopian imagination in *The Circle* is unambiguous. In the richly detailed description of this techno-dystopia, Eggers challenges us to the uncomfortable realization that the very technology that promises to bring us together and empower us could also be used to subjugate and divide us. *The Circle* is a book that generated a lot of discussion, both positive and negative. While it may not be a masterpiece of literary prose, it is undeniable that it sparked conversations about the impact of technology on our lives and the future of privacy and freedom in the digital age.

In *The Circle*, these fears are embodied in the transformation of the digital landscape into a panoptic sphere—a world where the individual is relentlessly observed, and every personal moment is transformed into data. The novel is a call to action to look at whether convenience versus autonomy is worth the destruction of personal privacy. Eggers builds his worlds with a clear and precise brilliance that lets the reader observe the bleak realities concealed behind the facade of technologically saturated glamour. The visual style of his dystopian fiction is inspired by an underlying criticism of contemporary

institutions in which every twist in the plot and every character development subliminally underlines the warning underneath: that uncurbed power—above all, when digitally empowered—is poised to disempower the very definition of human freedom. In so doing, his work is both a work of art and a political statement, challenging society to be vigilant in a time when the distinctions between innovation and exploitation are blurred.

## Chapter Two

### Panopticon Reimagined

Under observation, we act less free which means we effectively are less free.

– Edward Snowden.

In 2013 it was published that American whistle-blower Edward Snowden had leaked top secret documents from the National Security Agency - N.S.A - that showed how the American government was spying on its citizens (MacAskill). Some of the things revealed, amongst other things, were that several telephone companies provided the N.S.A with their customers' phone records, and that the N.S.A held the right to request user data from companies such as Google, Microsoft, Facebook, and Apple. Moreover, it was further revealed that the American government did not spy on their own citizens only, but several world leaders and foreign governments were objects of surveillance as well. The extent of the surveillance performed by the N.S.A may have come as a shock to the world; however, the notion of government surveillance and implementation of control, power, and discipline are not a new trend known to society. Nearly 70 years after the publication of the classic novel *1984* by English author George Orwell, the trends of surveillance, power, and control present in the story are still valid themes in today's society. Orwell was influenced in his writing by the totalitarian dystopian novel caused by a decade of political chaos. More precisely, Orwell's novel was rooted in hatred to the totalitarian and political authority of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin as well as the communist revolution in Russia and the fascist government in Spain ("1984: George Orwell's road to dystopia").

With the nearly exponential advancement of technology during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the future predictions made by science fiction authors in earlier decades have increasingly integrated into our daily lives. Dystopian fiction, particularly from the mid-20th century, often explores themes of governmental surveillance and control in contrast to individual privacy and autonomy. This genre typically centers on political matters and addresses issues such as personal identity, privacy, domination, and the power struggles that exist between the state and the self. Dystopian literature can arguably be regarded as “strategies of warning” that force its readers to acknowledge what the future may hold for generations to come if the flaws in our own society are not eradicated (Gottlieb, 4). According to the Oxford dictionary, the term ‘dystopia’ refers to “An imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible.”

In contemporary discourse, these works cast a long shadow as modern readers detect more and more recognizable features of surveillance and control woven into the fabric of digital society- a seamless progression connects the criticisms of the past with the present day challenges. The advancement of (surveillance) technology has been ascribed to be one of the possible drivers of creating a utopia (or dystopia) (Braun, 1994). Indeed, utopia functions as a mirror to society and displays flaws by projecting a better alternative (Sargent, 1994). In contrast, dystopia displays undesirable ways of individual life in a society. The creation of this alternative is an identification of social problems that should be avoided, an indictment of the real world, and a demand for improvement (Schulzke, 2014). Both the utopian and dystopian narratives are

presented to criticize the status quo, highlight the current social problems, and propose a better world (Mannheim, 1966; Marcuse, 1966).

Christine Lehen, in her book *Defining Dystopia*, also proposes that ‘a lack of privacy’ and ‘isolation’ are commonplace in dystopian fiction and that surveillance technology is frequently employed in dystopian novels to isolate and alienate characters by removing their right to privacy. This lack of privacy and associated alienation cultivates a society of distrust in which the state maintains the imbalance of power between the individual and the ruling elite. Further to this, Tom Moylan also notes that narratives set in dystopian societies often commence ‘in medias res’ within the ‘nightmarish society’, and that the narrative develops as the characters experience of alienation and isolation develops, followed by a growing awareness that the nightmare will continue and that there is nothing any individual can do to challenge or change the totalitarian status quo’ (Moylan 148).

The construction of a better world is most likely actualized by the innovation of technology, but not by the evolution of morality or democratization. Techno-utopians believe that advanced technologies can be utilized to generate social good and maintain social order at one end. In contrast, techno-dystopians have a pessimistic view that people’s freedom will be deprived by technological development at the other end (Dai and Hao, 2018). Given that a surveillance society could land on a continuum, the social impacts of surveillance technology are mixed between the two circumstances. One of the key components is the use of surveillance technology to create either an ideal or dystopian society. A society where surveillance is ingrained in the infrastructure through mandatory and ever-present technologies may be viewed

as a desirable environment for its comprehensive security and protection, or as an undesirable setting due to the infringement on privacy and personal freedom. As a surveillance society can exist on a spectrum, the social consequences of surveillance technology can vary between these two scenarios. Looking towards the future and exploring dystopian narratives centered on technology may provide insights into the social repercussions of surveillance technology and highlight the repercussions of sacrificing privacy in the pursuit of safety for future generations.

The evolution into techno-dystopian fiction marks a pivotal juncture in literary and cultural criticism. During the hours of transitional period from a digital revolution to the rise of datafication, authors began to explore the consequences of technology beyond its practical uses. They envisioned futures where connectivity, initially praised for its democratizing effects, transforms into a regulated space of constant surveillance. Eggers's novel *The Circle* is a prime example of this shift: it depicts a large corporation that claims to promote transparency but ultimately erodes individual privacy and autonomy, turning technology into a tool for total control. The significance of techno-dystopian stories lies in their ability to express a fundamental uncertainty about progress. Readers today are prompted to ponder the trade-offs between connectivity and privacy, between innovation and authority; a conflict that is as evident in Eggers's fictional realm as it is in the digital structure of our own existence.

Besides the genre shift in fiction, idea of surveillance culture has become crucial in comprehending modern realities. The term "surveillance culture" goes beyond being just a catchy phrase; it encapsulates a shift in everyday life where the distinction between public and private spheres is constantly being redefined.

In 1998 William Staples published *The Culture of Surveillance: Discipline and Social Control* in the United States, a few years later John McGrath used the term Surveillance Culture as a subtitle to his book *Loving Big Brother* (2004). Both works explore the role of surveillance in our society, with Staples characterising the link between surveillance and society as 'postmodern', while McGrath focused on the 'performative' aspects of surveillance, examining how individuals alter their actions when they expect to be watched. This analysis extends beyond the notions of a surveillance state or society to consider how people participate in, interact with, and even initiate surveillance activities. An unprecedented culture of surveillance has emerged at the beginning of the twenty first century. The traditional vertical, panoptic gaze of the state is now accompanied by horizontal or lateral surveillance, where individuals monitor each other on platforms like social media. However, the almost exponential advances in surveillance technologies since the turn of the century have surpassed even his totalitarian vision.

In their article *The Surveillance Assemblage*, Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson propose that it is through the convergence of numerous surveillance methods that a “complete picture of an individual” is created from “connected fragments of information” (Haggerty, and Ericson). Although the idea of the surveillant assemblage is a more precise reflection of contemporary society compared to Bentham's panopticon model, the panopticon concept remains valuable in the study of surveillance.

Historically, the idea of surveillance has its origins in concepts such as Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, which was further developed by Michel Foucault in his influential examination of disciplinary power, highlighting how

the potential of being observed could shape behaviour. Michel Foucault's concept of the 'panopticon' serves as a foundational theory for understanding modern surveillance practices. Foucault defines a panopticon as a power framework that enforces self-regulation through pervasive visibility, in which individuals internalize the observer's gaze. Through the concept of the panopticon, Foucault explored how the structure of social control influences individuals in situations where discipline is enforced, as well as the concept of power and knowledge. According to Foucault, "Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practice"(27). In the view of Foucault, the actual concern is not that individuals are arbitrarily oppressed by society, instead how society systematically develops and constructs their identities, as power gradually influences and pervades their conduct. David Lyon extends the concept of the panopticon to the digital age, claiming that recent surveillance technologies create a 'digital panopticon', that penetrates everyday life. Lyon provides an in-depth study of the dynamics driving current trends, as well as the processes and results involved in the collection, organization, and treatment of personal information, as well as its manipulation and commercialization. (47)

The digital realm brings about surveillance that is participatory, automated, and ever-present. Surveillance culture has always been a part of modern society, supporting various institutions such as prisons and workplaces. The pervasive monitoring that once existed in the physical confines of the Panopticon has exploded into a networked regime, where every click, like, or search is logged and analyzed. Such a transformation attests to the contemporary relevance of surveillance culture as a tool that not only yields

enormous political and economic benefits but also shapes our aspirations, fears, and even our sense of self. As Eggers's narrative illustrates, modern technology while promising radical openness and community also fosters environments in which every individual becomes both a subject to be watched and a repository of data exploited by unseen forces.

Two other authors who have suggested an analysis of digital surveillance are Randolph Lewis and Thomas Mathiesen. Lewis applies the term "panopticon" to the mass surveillance of corporations that collect personal information given voluntarily for convenience or fun. Mathiesen discusses the transformation of the panoptic model into the "synopticon," in which the many control the few. This concept is particularly relevant to the modern era of mass media and social media, which allow numerous individuals to observe and monitor the actions of a few individuals, often public figures like politicians, celebrities, and well-known personalities. In the synopticon, the power of surveillance is distributed among the general population so it is decentralized. The synopticon is shaped by voyeurism: the actions of public figures are subject to the judgment of the masses, who search for accountability and apply social pressure. Public visibility becomes a means of regulating society with the constant process of feedback.

In order to comprehend the consequences of this new typology of surveillance, the new dogma of social transparency has to be taken into account. The ethical principles followed by *The Circle* aim to move beyond the panoptic paradigm by adopting a synoptic viewpoint facilitated by digital technology; this system puts individuals under continuous surveillance by their peers. The transparent architecture of the company represents the aesthetic of the

totalitarian transparency policy. In the “digital panopticon,” transparency is guaranteed by “exhibitionism,” “voyeurism,” and “hypercommunication” (Han, 46)—that is, “decidedly post-Orwellian” (Schleusener, 194). The promise of transparency in *The Circle* is to lead to the utopian dream of “a perfect society free of violence, crime, and political corruption” (192); whereas, according to Hannah Arendt (1998), the overlap between the public and private spheres is a typical characteristic of totalitarianism and has negative effects on individual freedom and the health of political life.

A deeper layer of this discussion emerges with the rise of surveillance capitalism, a term that has acquired a near-mythical status among critical theorists attempting to explain this new phenomenon. Surveillance capitalism has its root in the early developments of the internet and the attendant business models that sought to monetize the attention and behaviors of millions of users. Scholars such as Shoshana Zuboff have argued that the data from the individual is now extracted with more efficiency. The important characteristic of Surveillance capitalism is the commodification of personal data—turning everyday human actions into quantifiable and marketable assets. The methods employed bear resemblance to earlier forms of industrial capitalism, but are being carried out on a much larger scale and having more intimate effects: personal habits, preferences, relationships, and even emotions are being captured and repackaged as profits. In a vivid passage that has resonated with critics and laypersons alike, Zuboff writes, “Surveillance capitalism unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data” a pronouncement that captures the profound disquiet of a society increasingly stripped of its privacy. Her 2015 article ‘Big Other: Surveillance

Capitalism and the Prospects of An Information Civilization’, which introduces arguments developed at length in her later book, provides the explanation:

“Bentham's design, which I used as a central metaphor in my earlier work [In the Age of The Smart Machine, 1988, Ch.9, Ch.10] is prosaic compared to this new architecture. The panopticon was a physical design that privileged a single point of observation. The anticipatory conformity it induced required the cunning production of specific behaviours while one was inside the panopticon, but that behaviour could be set aside once one exited that physical place. In the 1980s it was an apt metaphor for the hierarchical spaces of the workplace [...] [but in the contemporary world] habitats inside and outside the human body are saturated with data and produce radically distributed opportunities for observation, interpretation, communication, influence, prediction, and ultimately modification of the totality of action. Unlike the centralised power of mass society, there is no escape from Big Other. There is no place to be where the Other is not.”(80)

The importance of surveillance capitalism lies in its ability to reshape economic and social relations. Traditional paradigms of privacy and personal boundaries are destabilized by the constant drive for collecting data, while both individuals and communities must contend with the notion that every act of engagement is subject to extraction and repurposing. The contemporary relevance of surveillance capitalism is starkly visible in the architecture of modern platforms and digital infrastructures, where algorithms not only forecast but actively shape consumer behavior, ultimately questioning the very nature of individual agency and freedom.

Yet, perhaps the most alarming and timely concept explored in this chapter is that of digital totalitarianism which combines traditional totalitarian tendencies with the technological control capabilities provided by modern digital tools. New tactics of control have evolved with the transition of modern society from industrial to information economy. In a similar vein it has been suggested that the term totalitarianism was not a common term used in the English language until after the Second World War; when the term achieved a negative connotation in the sense that “sociologically and politically minded critics regarded totalitarianism as a dangerous phenomenon engrossed by evil and thereby opposed to independence and freedom” (Kamenka, 821). The key aspects of totalitarianism can be summed up as “the desire for complete control over the hearts and bodies, minds and souls, of the citizens of the nation” (Booker, 119). The same concept is rephrased by Leslie Holmes in his work *Totalitarianism* in which he describes it as “a systematic ‘total’ control over society, a politicisation of all aspects of everyday life, where the individual is under extreme subordination of the government (Holmes 448).

Digital totalitarianism envisions a world where surveillance technologies, big data, and algorithmic governance converge to create an environment where behavior can be completely predicted and controlled. In this scenario, digital spaces become the modern equivalent of public areas, where any form of dissent is not just discouraged but prevented in advance through predictive assessment and constant monitoring. It is crucial to analyze digital totalitarianism as it challenges the assumptions of liberal democracy and prompts us to reconsider the concept of freedom itself. Taking all of this into account, totalitarian regimes play a central part in dystopian fiction. The regimes

described are often employed as a means to critique oppressive real-world societies. Dystopian fiction urges readers to reflect on social and political tendencies by painting a bleak fictional future that could potentially become reality if preventative measures are not taken. By exploring this concept, writers and theorists expose how democratic institutions might be repurposed as instruments of digital coercion. In the narrative of *The Circle*, the idea that transparency and connectivity can be manipulated to diminish individual autonomy blurs the line between active participation and authoritarian control. The contemporary relevance of digital totalitarianism is underscored by global concerns over privacy breaches, government-backed digital surveillance, and the rapid advancements in technologies such as facial recognition and predictive policing—each representing step bringing us closer to a future where digital platforms may silently suppress free thought and individual liberty.

The interplay between these concepts is not incidental; rather, it forms a tightly interwoven tapestry of analysis that is evident in various literary and theoretical discussions. Throughout the development of dystopian stories, there has been a continuous desire to question the potential benefits of progress and the consequences of unlimited power. In its early incarnations, dystopian fiction warned of the dehumanizing potentials of modern industrial society, while techno-dystopian narratives has broadened this critique to include the specters of algorithmic decision-making and networked control. The rise of surveillance culture represents the acceptance of constant monitoring a concept that was originally used for disciplinary purposes but now appears in a wide range of digital platforms and corporate surveillance strategies. Surveillance capitalism and digital totalitarianism, in turn, encapsulate the processes by which

information is extracted, repurposed, and deployed to shape collective behavior creating a society where freedom is slowly overshadowed by a omnipresent digital observation.

The intricate relationship is highlighted in Eggers's novel *The Circle*, where the idea of seamless, transparent connection turns into a system that threatens personal freedom and encourages self-censorship. Through a narrative voice that shifts between a perfect world of unlimited information and a nightmare of complete surveillance, *The Circle* captures the uncertainty of contemporary technology culture. The portrayal of a corporate environment that drowns out individual voices with overwhelming data and conformity reflects long-standing concerns in critical thinking. The book challenges readers to consider that in our eagerness for a technologically advanced future, we may be sacrificing the depth of human experience for a false sense of ease and connection. The constant presence of surveillance - whether as a societal norm, economic motivator, or political tool - serves as a reminder that our digital lives are not only improved, but also trapped in systems of control reminiscent of dark historical times.

To fully apprehend these transformations, one must acknowledge the historical continuities that link past and present. Whereas the optimism of early modern visions held that technology would liberate human potential, later critiques reminded us that every innovation carries within it the seeds of domination. In contemporary discussions, this ambivalence is laid bare by the interplay between surveillance capitalism and digital totalitarianism. In this thoroughfare from paper to pixel, the individual is increasingly rendered both visible and vulnerable, cast into a digital panopticon where every interaction is

monitored, mediated, and ultimately monetized. At the core of these reflections is a tension that has animated much of critical thought since the inception of modernity: the tension between the emancipatory potential of new technologies and their capacity to enclose and constrain human freedom. The former, by turning human experience into a commodity ripe for extraction, challenges the notion that the digital sphere is a neutral space of creativity and exchange. The latter shows how digital systems can be used for controlling purposes, resembling tactics used by totalitarian regimes, warning us to the dangers of authoritarian tendencies in democratic societies.

Intellectuals ranging from Foucault to Zuboff have sought to interrogate the ways in which power and knowledge interact in digital age. Foucault believed that a surveillance state was not just about physical control but also how individuals internalize discipline in society. Zuboff, on the other hand, raises concerns about privacy and agency in an economy reliant on data extraction. The paradox here is that advancements meant to empower are also used to monitor and control. This dialectical interplay between empowerment and oppression underscores the urgency of rethinking our collective future and safeguards a measure of hope amid increasing technological determinism.

In drawing these threads together, it becomes clear that the landscape of techno-dystopian narratives as seen in *The Circle* operates not only as a reflection of societal fears but also provides a critical analysis of the merging influences that are changing our everyday existence. The theories discussed in this section not only provide a comprehensive historical overview of these ideas but also urge readers to actively engage with the blurred lines between the

observer and the observed, between those who free and those who control, which have become increasingly blurred in modern times.

Ultimately, the journey through these interwoven themes offers a potent reminder that literature and theory are not only provides insights into potential realities but also blueprints for resistance. In the final analysis, this chapter reaffirms that the struggle against any form of totalitarian control—digital or otherwise—is not solely about the preservation of privacy or individual rights; it is about safeguarding the very essence of what it means to be human. The task at hand is to articulate not only the dangers of digital omnipresence but also the potential pathways for reclaiming agency in a world increasingly dominated by the relentless logic of data and control. By doing so, we are reminded that we still have the power to shape the narrative of the future, and that the legacy of dystopian caution remains an essential guide in the quest for a truly liberated future.

## Chapter Three

### Soft Power and Subtle Coercion

The prevailing belief is that in earlier times, Big Brother was watching, while in contemporary times, corporatocracy is watching. Generally, in dystopian environments, constant surveillance is accepted as a fundamental aspect of control, viewing privacy as an obstacle to authority. Digital totalitarianism arises at the crossroads of widespread surveillance systems and authoritarian governance that functions within seemingly democratic contexts. Dave Eggers' *The Circle* demonstrates how the idea of free speech has been warped by social media. It presents a perspective where social media platforms dictate the 'terms and conditions' of free expression, creating a contradiction in which human agency is shaped and reinforced through digital channels.

The novel revolves around Mae Holland, who considers her new workplace, the Circle, a "heaven" on earth (Eggers, 1). The company provides the employees with all the amenities one could want: insurance for parents, free health and wellness service, well-organised dormitory rooms, gymnasium, beautiful campus, hotels and restaurants, theatre, etc. The transparent architecture of the company represents the aesthetic of the totalitarian transparency policy. Eggers depicts a place where everything is made out of glass: desks, walls, doors, ceilings, and "the Glass Eatery" (Eggers, 15). "The designers really like glass, eh?" (Eggers, 40), a question raised by Mae encompasses the ideal of the Circle. 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 with no lies, and also on a political level, as a form of accountability.

The architectural concept inspired by Foucault, based on Bentham's design, consisted of a circular structure filled with numerous rooms, featuring a central observation tower. This design allows for a complete oversight of all inmates from the observation tower. The idea of transparency within the Circle aligns with Foucault's perspective. This is evident as the individuals appointed to the circle were immediately provided with a new laptop and a mobile phone, which have not yet been released to the market.

There is a dedicated team responsible for transferring data from new employees' devices to their newly issued gadgets. This process guarantees that employees' data is securely stored on the company's server. Moreover, every area of the building, including the dormitory, is equipped with surveillance cameras. These cameras monitor all activities, capturing interactions between employees. Since all employees are being observed, they generally act in an expected manner. The company controls the behavior of employees as well as the consumers endorsing the Orwellesque mottoes:

“SECRETS ARE LIES

SHARING IS CARING

PRIVACY IS THEFT” (Eggers 305).

Mae's laptop features three screens; the first screen is designated for interacting with customers. The second is utilized for providing reports to her team leader. The third screen allows her to check her social media and connections beyond her immediate circle. This is the way every employee in the Circle comes under heavy monitoring. In addition to this, every Circler is forced

to use the circle search app to know the exact whereabouts of other Circlers. One more app, named “Cool New App” gives a thorough history of those who check in and check out the different departments located within the office building every day. This digitized wonder leaves no one to hide any secrets because it is run by the ideology of transparency. To enhance transparency outside, Eamon Bailey launched a new project named ‘Surf Sight’. With this, any place in the world can be viewed by anyone online, with the help of a lollipop-sized camera placed around the world. These cameras are connected to the Surf Sight. For this purpose, the company sells these cameras at an affordable price. And the company encourages the customers to place it where they like. This thumb-sized camera is waterproof, windproof, sand-proof, animal-proof, insect proof, and everything-proof. Hence, placing these cameras in any place makes surveillance possible. The following statement by Bailey reveals how the Circle keeps on surreptitiously watching global events.

“From Khartoum to Pyongyang, where the authorities had no idea they were being watched by 3000 Circlers in California, they had no notion that they could be watched, that this technology was or would ever be possible” (Eggers, 135).

The same technology is employed to monitor the external actions of Circlers. Mae Holland, the protagonist, has an aversion to being open and is hesitant to share her enthusiasm for kayaking. However, this is detected by Eamon Bailey through Mae Holland's questionable behavior. He then emphasizes the significance of transparency to eliminate any potential criminal activity at any time, in any place, by anyone. In this way, the authoritative Bailey holds a technological advantage over Mae Holland. He impresses this idea upon

her. Consequently, the principle of transparency ignites the notion of power. This power operates within the Circle effectively through methods of surveillance.

One of the pivotal innovations from the company is the thumb-sized camera ‘SeeChange’, which can be placed and concealed in numerous locations or even worn by an individual. In this latter scenario, like with Mae, everything she experiences and observes is broadcast to the entire world through the Circle's social media platform. It carries a dual significance, representing both observation and the potential for transformation. When potential human rights abusers and criminals are aware that their actions might be seen by the public, it will foster a society devoid of human rights violations and crime. ‘SeeChange’ offers the promise of immediate accountability through transparency, shared knowledge, and documentation. “ALL THAT HAPPENS MUST BE KNOWN” (Eggers 18). One of the “Three Wise Men” and leaders of the Circle, Eamon Bailey, describes the camera as introducing a “Second Enlightenment” (Eggers, 17), and as a means to protect human rights and prevent crime. In his words;

“The square is quiet now, but can you imagine if something happened? There would be instant accountability. Any soldier committing an act of violence would instantly be recorded for posterity. He could -be tried for war crimes, you name it. And even if they clear the square of journalists, the cameras are still there. And no matter how many times they try to eliminate the cameras, because they’re so small, they’ll never know for sure where they are, who’s placed them where and when. And the not-knowing will prevent abuses of power. You take the average soldier who's now worried that a dozen cameras will catch him, for all eternity,

dragging some woman down the street? Well, he should worry. He should worry about these cameras. He should worry about SeeChange. That's what we're calling them." (Eggers, 66-67)

The Circle's projects are promoted in such a manner, as to provide safety and security to the people. However, this results in everyone being monitored. Consequently, extensive information about each person is gathered. Comprehensive awareness of individuals and their circumstances serves as a means to acquire influence. This allows the Circle to maintain control over everyone. This is how they can gain power at the micro as well as macro levels. "If everyone is watching, you'll be your best self. There's no better motivation than knowing that others are watching. It keeps you honest" (Eggers, 305). This clearly illustrates the moral rationale employed by the Circle to advance its surveillance agenda, suggesting that continuous observation fosters improved behavior while disregarding the ethical concerns surrounding surveillance without informed consent and the right to privacy. They assert that transparency encourages accountability, trust, and integrity. It also promotes connectivity to unite individuals, bridge divides, dismantle barriers to foster inclusion and equality, and create a global community across diverse cultures and communities. Nevertheless, these claims often obscure the true intentions of the Circle, concealing its real objectives by diminishing the sense of individuality as a whole and exploiting it for manipulation and control. By eliminating individuals' privacy, The Circle gains unprecedented access to personal data, enabling them to exploit vulnerabilities and exert control over people's lives. This transparency transforms into a surveillance mechanism, where every action

and thought is scrutinized, ultimately resulting in a decline of autonomy and freedom.

Digital totalitarianism relies not only on technological panopticism but also on ideological interpellation, whereby users are “hailed” into predetermined roles within the corporate imaginary. In *The Circle*, this interpellation begins with ‘TruYou’, a unified identity platform that changed the Internet within a year, effectively subsuming all prior avatars, pseudonyms, and anonymous accounts under a single, traceable profile.

Instead, he put all of it, all of every user’s needs and tools, into one pot and invented TruYou—one account, one identity, one password, one payment system, per person. There were no more passwords, no multiple identities. Your devices knew who you were, and your one identity—the TruYou, unbendable and unmaskable—was the person paying, signing up, responding, viewing and reviewing, seeing and being seen. You had to use your real name, and this was tied to your credit cards, your bank, and thus paying for anything was simple. One button for the rest of your life online.(Eggers 21 – 22)

By blurring the lines between public and private, TruYou redefines every instance of digital expression as the property of corporations. This heightened visibility allows the Circlers to gain insight into one another’s thoughts. Consequently, power dynamics emerge between the Circle and those who are connected to it in various ways. Their invasive digital technology is utilized to assert their political superiority. Eamon Bailey, who champions the idea of transparency, holds a fervent belief that everything on the planet should be

safeguarded. Thus, he argues that erasing data is akin to committing an act as grave as killing babies. In *The Circle*, the company's SeeChange cameras and TruYou identity system reflect Foucault's notion of the "disciplinary gaze," turning every employee into both an observer and an observed.

The society depicted in *The Circle* serves as a contemporary interpretation of a totalitarian regime, closely mirroring the dystopian themes found in novels like George Orwell's *1984* through its depiction of perpetual surveillance. While *1984* features Big Brother as the constant watcher, in *The Circle*, everyone is involved in the act of monitoring. Mae introduces a new program from the Circle that enables individuals to track fugitives using the global network of Circlers. For instance, they manage to locate a fugitive in the UK in just six minutes.

"Within three minutes, there were 201 photos posted, most of them close corollaries to the face of Fiona Highbridge. On screen, votes were tallying, indicating which of the photos were most likely her. In fourminutes it was down to five prime candidates." (Eggers 449).

Digital totalitarianism is not merely enforced; it flourishes through the consent of the populace. By positioning users as 'digital citizens,' whose rights to speech and voting are confined within corporate platforms, the Circle company monopolizes political conversation and redefines the concept of citizenship itself. When Mae suggests that every voter should have a mandatory Circle account, she unknowingly supports a system where political engagement is dependent on corporate identity verification a type of soft despotism that eliminates any realm outside the platform's ideological boundaries. Mae,

increasingly captivated by the Circle's messaging, begins to speak the mantras of transparency as though they were gospel rather than mere marketing language. Her moral perspective alters: withholding information is seen as a betrayal, while transparency is deemed a moral obligation. This transformation reflects Althusser's idea of the ideological state apparatus: the platform seems harmless helping everyone stay connected yet it exerts significant power to exclude, shame, or erase those who do not conform. As Peter McKenna observes, *The Circle* illustrates how "citizenship itself in Eggers's novel has become digitally privatized" under the Circle's ideological apparatus (88).

Importantly, the privatization of citizenship also permeates governance. During a worldwide meeting in Town Hall, Mae proposes that all voters should have mandatory Circle accounts, arguing that registration rates will increase if accounts are frozen until ballots are cast. Bailey and Stenton eagerly endorse this naïve suggestion, praising its 'efficiency' and 'universal accessibility'. In this instance, the novel clearly illustrates the shift from corporate service to pseudo-sovereign control. The Circle, as a global corporation, takes over state responsibilities by providing "documentation and accountability" for elected representatives through live streams of legislative meetings effectively turning the legislative body into a formatted feed and replacing parliamentary discourse with 'likes' and 'smiles'. *The Circle* demonstrates how digital totalitarianism appropriates the language of empowerment 'participation,' 'community', 'sharing' to normalize corporate governance. *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, 13). The narrative depicts demoxie within the framework of a seemingly utopian community that has devolved into a dystopian reality. Demoxie induces a state of mass hypnosis, where individuals collectively derive pleasure from immediate voting outcomes. The traditional democratic process has forfeited its deliberative phase, yielding to the dominance of ‘moxie’. The synergy of impulse, pleasure, and speed, driven by Internet technology, has revitalized the democratic process. Ultimately, democracy has transformed from a continual process of deliberation, reasoning, and rationale into an affective practice that prioritises emotions, joy (for those who feel empowered), and the instant acknowledgement of personal expression. When the leaders decide “to complete the circle”, and that means demoxie for everybody, 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.

The novel encourages contemplation not just about the scope and nature of publicity, transparency, and knowledge, but also about their underlying intentions. To explore this, it seeks to recover historical data through the initiation of the 'Past Perfect' project. This initiative aspires to bridge the gaps in personal histories. Via this project, everyone’s ancestry is revealed. This data is then transformed into information. Subsequently, this information is set to be uploaded into the digital realm. Anne, a key member among the forty in the Circle, is assigned to undertake this mission. The results of Anne’s ancestry illustrate the tainted legacy of her ancestors and her parents' extramarital

relationships. This troubling history places her in a state of mental distress. Consequently, her followers and colleagues threatened to quit their jobs. Despite these challenges, Bailey remains steadfast and refuses to abandon the project.

In *The Circle*'s denouement, the regime's ultimate ambition is fully realized: complete integration of optics, data, and governance into a single, unassailable system. Mae, chosen as the company's poster child of transparency, calls for the installation of SeeChange cameras in private homes to "ensure there are no unreported atrocities" (Eggers, 330). The thunderous applause that accompanies her proposal is overwhelming, a corporate ritual celebrating the elimination of 'dark corners' where dissent could thrive. Yet this final step reveals the crux of digital totalitarianism: the substitution of algorithmically enforced orthodoxy for political pluralism. Mae's captivated audience neglects to interrogate who determines "atrocities" or who is responsible for holding the cameras accountable. Consequently, the system shifts effortlessly from voluntary acceptance of transparency to mandatory compliance under the pretext of communal welfare. The oppression of data is therefore imposed not through blatant coercion, but through collective agreement to support "the greater good." In this way, *The Circle* illustrates the Foucauldian notion that contemporary discipline is most potent when it is self-imposed under the guise of contributing to the greater good, as expressed by one of *The Circle*'s characters;

"You connected it all. You found a way to save all the souls. This is what we were doing in the church—we tried to get them all. How to save them all? This has been the work of missionaries for millennia. Now we're all God. Every one of us will soon be able to see, and cast judgment upon,

every other. We'll see what He sees. We'll articulate His judgment. We'll channel His wrath and deliver His forgiveness. On a constant and global level. All religion has been waiting for this, when every human is a direct and immediate messenger of God's will." (Eggers, 398-399)

As the narrative unfolds, employees willingly replace the "invisible chains" of external coercion with the "voluntary servitude" of metrics and peer-approval scores. Mae's journey from an undeveloped new employee to a willing participant in the Circle's agenda reflects the cyclical indoctrination process. Her cyclical justifications for the Circle's constant policies put emphasis on the dangers of normalization in a closed system. Mae's initial embrace of transparency appears voluntary, even liberating: she feels "visible" and "relevant" in a world where "no one wants to miss anything." (Eggers, 86) The Circle meticulously tracks her evolution from a highly sought influencer to a tool of the regime. The corporate culture of the company, with its incessant CircleSurveys coursing through her headset, diminishes her ability to think independently. As Mae's keystroke speed escalates, her tendency to reflect lessens a phenomenon aptly described as 'cognitive capitalism', where mental surplus is exploited for corporate gain. Indeed, by the time Mae's friend Mercer tries to intervene arguing that compulsive sharing is "manufacturing unnaturally extreme social needs." (Eggers, 134) she cannot imagine a life beyond the feed. Mercer's sorrow reflects Foucault's critique: contemporary power seeks not to punish bodies but to discipline souls.

Mae's final act of—streaming her parents' intimate trauma live—marks the erasure of boundaries between subject and object, public and private. In this pivotal moment, the ideal of transparency unveils its true purpose: a tool of

coercive conformity that enforces adherence through collective surveillance and algorithmic moderation. By illustrating this decline, *The Circle* highlights how digital totalitarianism transforms civic engagement into performative loyalty, and public confession into a means of corporate authority.

This fetishization and celebration of technology is not limited to the individual. Rather, it is also a collective experience. Rather, it is a shared experience among the collective. In front of the entire Circle community in attendance, she successfully identifies a female criminal. She is then tasked with locating her ex-boyfriend Mercer, an anti-Circler who is hiding in the Californian woods. The search ends in tragedy with Mercer's death when a drone pursues him, causing his car to plunge off a bridge. The sequence depicting the pursuit of Mercer during his escape from SoulSearch illustrates a community excited to engage with cutting-edge technology together. Nevertheless, this sense of collective unity also breaks through the physical boundaries of the hall, as the shared experience permeates cyberspace. Millions of viewers watch the event on livestream and have a say in deciding Mercer's fate via their smartphones. This incident portrays that transparency and full knowledge also have detrimental consequences for the health and lives of people. This is reinforced through Mercer's letter to Mae, "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, 19)

The novel vividly depicts the destructive effect of violating personal autonomy through its protagonist, Mae Holland. Initially enthusiastic about the company's mission, Mae gradually loses self-confidence as the firm's culture continues to monitor and affect her actions and thoughts: "Mae felt as if she

were no longer herself, but a product of the Circle. Her thoughts, her actions, everything was now dictated by the need to be seen, to be validated by the watchers." (Eggers, 321)

On one of the novel's final pages, this correlation is explicitly confirmed: "There used to be the option of opting out. But now that's over. Completion is the end. We're closing the circle around everyone." (Eggers, 481) The restriction of personal freedom illustrated in *The Circle* raises important moral questions concerning the relationship between technological advancement and individual rights. The book explores the moral implications of commodifying personal data, where the gathering and use of information favor corporate interests at the expense of personal freedoms. This analysis is in line with current debates about data privacy and surveillance capitalism, underlining the urgent need for ethical guidelines to oversee the management of personal data.

The novel's strength lies in its portrayal of digital totalitarianism as an insidious byproduct of benevolent-sounding ideals. The Circle's founders—an enigmatic triumvirate known as the Three Wise Men—never brand themselves as rulers or censors. In Orwell's *1984*, as a case in point, Big Brother and telescreens stand as symbols of power and surveillance in the totalitarian state of Oceania. In this respect, *The Circle* is no exception. Close to the end of the novel, the 'Three Wise Men' the name of the three creators and main figures of the company meet in order to put in the same fish tank some creatures brought by Stenton from the unmapped depths of the Marianas Trench, more specifically an octopus, a male seahorse and his progeny, and a shark. This scene can be described as an obviously symbolic moment and establishes a parallelism

between each of these creatures and each of the Three Wise Men. The seahorse is the symbolic corollary to Ty Gospodinov, who hides while his babies float aimlessly in a group above . The octopus, on its part, represents Eamon Bailey, —who is constantly exploring with his tentacles, as if he wants to know about every inch of the tank Finally, the shark stands for Tom Stenton, who seems able to consume nearly anything and who is motivated primarily by power and money and, thus, represents the greatest threat to the utopian dream of the Circle community. When the three creatures are put together in the aquarium, the shark eats not only the seahorses and the octopus, but also the seaweed, the coral and the anemones within the tank. With this symbolic scene, Eggers seems to be suggesting that, even though the intentions behind the devising of the Circle's technologies and policies might be noble, these good intentions are always overshadowed by economic interests, and human beings often end up compromising their rights and freedoms for the benefit of those in power.

The company's rigid devotion to its own ideology, imposed through social pressure and algorithmic manipulation, matches the oppressive tactics typical of authoritarian governments, which shows the dystopian reality of digital totalitarianism, in which individual freedom is sacrificed for corporate interests. Furthermore, this novel can be viewed as a cautionary story about the risks of granting excessive power to one entity, be it a government or a corporation. The title and central theme of the novel, the circle, symbolize completion, unity, and perfection, but they also imply entrapment, surveillance, and a diminished sense of autonomy.

## Chapter Four

### Conclusion

In the flickering glow of countless screens, our societies have edged closer to a chilling paradox: the more we seek connection, the more we risk surrendering our deepest freedoms. In *The Circle*, Dave Eggers paints a future in which the pursuit of absolute transparency serves as the lever for totalitarian control. In this scenario, individuals mistakenly think they consent to their own surveillance, believing that openness fosters trust and advancement.

*The Circle* functions as a cautionary parable regarding the alluring perils of technological optimism. In the initial chapters, transparency shines as a promise of democracy—an unfiltered reality where accountability prevails. However, as Eggers unravels this ideal, it swiftly transforms into a surveillance regime disguised in utopian language. The novel compels readers to interpret this change and confront the delicate line that divides openness from oppression. Transparency, once celebrated as a virtue, transforms into a tool exploited by those in authority under the pretense of progress. Eggers reveals that the promise of openness can erode autonomy, as social pressure and algorithmic reward systems shape behavior more effectively than overt coercion.

Dave Eggers' novel *The Circle* acts as both a source of inspiration and a warning sign. At first, the ideals of the Circle corporation—total transparency, interconnected lives, and unquestionable connectivity—appear to be a utopian vision. However, Eggers skillfully uncovers the sinister framework that supports this ideal: a system where involvement is mandatory, dissent is delegitimized, and privacy is viewed as betrayal. By tracing Mae Holland's path

from enthusiastic newcomer to zealous promoter, readers observe the gradual loss of individuality in exchange for acceptance and validation.

Mae Holland's journey into conformity and complicity within *The Circle* illustrates digital totalitarianism not through outright coercion, but through persuasive algorithms. Her quest for validation, constant checking of metrics, and unquestioning loyalty to the company's mission highlight the psychological framework of a new form of authoritarianism—constructed not on fear, but on approvals, likes, and follows. Eggers does not create new monsters; he simply amplifies those that already exist. Real-world technology giants mimic the behaviors of the Circle—focusing on data extraction, undermining privacy, and influencing public dialogue. The oppression within *It* does not depend on violence; it flourishes through participation, particularly voluntary participation.

A dark theme woven throughout the novel is how noise ceaseless updates, limitless metrics, and constant connectivity stifles dissent. The very instruments intended to enhance expression morph into tools of regulation. Eggers ingeniously builds a dystopia where silence is viewed with suspicion. In this environment, choosing to disengage is not just a statement it is viewed as betrayal. Mae's shift into a supporter of surveillance stems not from ideology, but from exhaustion and fear of rejection. This mirrors the dynamics of actual digital coercion, where platforms subtly penalise absence while rewarding overexposure. Personal autonomy diminishes not through dictatorship, but through reliance.

Eggers warns not just against a single corporation—he cautions against a broader cultural shift. By depicting a society where every aspect of existence

is interconnected through one platform, Eggers prompts readers to contemplate how our own digital lives are progressively approaching this reality with each technological advancement. This convergence—of identity, economy, governance, and personal connection—sparks unsettling inquiries. When technology monopolies dictate not only our preferences but our values, who shapes truth? Who determines what is significant, permissible, or forgotten?

Eggers constantly stresses the importance of the idea of pushing back against the Circle's pervasive control, shedding light on the potential opportunity for reclaiming autonomy. Characters like Mercer embody active resistance to the Circle's surveillance, thereby offering an alternative perspective to the culture of compliance: "Mae, can't you see what this is doing to you, to us, to everyone? This isn't freedom. This is enslavement"(Eggers, 321). Mercer's stand brings forth the ethical dilemmas and personal sacrifices entwined with living under constant surveillance. His viewpoint challenges the notion that surveillance is inherently valuable and instead underscores its dehumanizing impacts. However, Mercer's tragic outcome underlines the doomed fate which those opposing the surveillance state usually encounter.

In the final scenes, the reader is left with Annie's collapse and Mae's triumphant final embrace of full transparency. The novel ends on a terrifying note: it is implied that the Circle's next project will be to figure out a way to read minds. In the view of Mae, people deserve to know what other people are thinking about and dreaming about. Mae concludes, "Why shouldn't they know them? The world deserved nothing less and would not wait" (Eggers 497).

Eggers does not offer simple solutions or outline a clear strategy for opposition. Rather, he compels a reflection: where do we find ourselves? Are

we the quiet Annie, feeling overwhelmed and disenchanted? Or are we the calculating Mae, flourishing within systems we understand are ethically flawed? Eggers appears to imply that without critical thought and deliberate resistance, society may already be beyond redemption. *The Circle* doesn't succeed because it is villainous—it succeeds because it is seductive. In other words, the Circle will soon have eradicated the final sanctuary of personal privacy. Once that occurs, individuals will become subservient to the Circle's influence—they won't be able to harbour a single anti-Circle thought without the Circle being aware of it. As the Circle's authoritarian control nears completion, the novel reaches a grim conclusion. However, Eggers might be presenting his story as a warning: it may be too late for Mae, but readers still have the opportunity to resist the values of the social media age and uphold privacy, autonomy, and face-to-face interactions.

*The Circle* serves not just as fiction but also as diagnosis and foresight. Eggers employs the novel format to scrutinize the consequences of unchecked technological optimism. In the novel *The Circle*, readers are encouraged to scrutinize the role and effects of technology within society as the boundaries of technology and its impact on personal and communal behaviours continue to expand. The analysis reveals that the ethical stance of the Circle's creators is compromised while also reflecting wider real-world ethical dilemmas associated with technological progress. Furthermore, the narrative portrays a reality where technological advancements are seen as unambiguously beneficial to society. However, *The Circle* emphasises that advancements in technology and their societal and individual repercussions are relevant not only in dystopian literature but also shape our everyday actions. There is an urgent necessity for

individuals to recognize that their engagement might jeopardize both their personal and professional lives.

On one hand, technological advancements have facilitated a new level of surveillance and data gathering, raising concerns about governmental overreach and corporate exploitation. Conversely, these advancements have also granted individuals enhanced connectivity, access to information, and platforms for expressing themselves. Although there are some signs of surveillance, particularly from influential entities like governments and corporations, they are seldom as oppressive as those depicted in literature. According to Evgeny Morozov's paper, "The Myth of the Digital Dystopia," the belief that we are heading toward a bleak digital future is challenged. Morozov addresses prevalent anxieties regarding technology's impact on society. He acknowledges that concerns about surveillance and control are valid but believes they are often overstated. He contends that technology embodies a complexity that goes beyond simply being beneficial or detrimental, urging us to thoughtfully evaluate its utilization. He posits that managing the digital realm effectively necessitates engaging in informed dialogues and making educated choices. His perspective encourages us to critically reflect and actively participate in open discussions about technology's role in our lives. The widespread nature of surveillance and the violation of privacy are evident. However, the current trajectory holds significant dangers and, if unchecked, could result in a future where individuals are subjected to unparalleled levels of control and manipulation by dominant forces. Still, it is crucial to recognize the critical juncture we are at, where decisive measures can alter the direction of

our digital path. By pushing for enhanced transparency, accountability, and ethical standards within the tech sector, we can reduce the risks of slipping into a dystopian existence.

In response to these pressing issues, there is a growing call for a shift in our approach to technology and data governance. This transformation requires prioritising human rights, ethical principles, and democratic values over the relentless pursuit of profit and control. Advocates stress the necessity for increased transparency, accountability, and regulatory oversight of tech companies, as well as the exploration of alternative digital economy models that empower consumers to reclaim ownership and control over their personal information. This urgent need underscores the significance of collaborative efforts to ensure a democratic future in the digital realm.

*The Circle* is more than fiction it is a diagnosis and a prophecy. Eggers employs the novel form to scrutinize the cost of unchecked technological optimism. As an illustration of digital totalitarianism, it shows how mechanisms of control evolve when disguised as benevolence. Eggers's book warns that the temptation of 'knowing everything' conceals the threat of being excessively known. While digital systems offer connection and security, they can also reinforce fresh power dynamics. Our awareness should go beyond requiring transparency from organizations to advocating for the right to remain opaque to safeguard certain aspects of our lives and maintain our freedom from hidden authorities. The tyranny within *The Circle* doesn't shout—it whispers in updates, metrics, smiles, and seamless interfaces. And therein lies its genius. As readers, scholars, and citizens, our task is to maintain skepticism, preserve

plurality, and champion privacy in an era where visibility serves as currency and invisibility is rebellion.

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