Surveillance Capitalism: A Critical Analysis of *The Circle* by Dave Eggers

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ABSTRACT

This study examines *The Circle* (2013) by the American writer Dave Eggers, utilizing Shoshana Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism, a framework that foregrounds the commodification of personal data as a mechanism for corporate exploitation. By situating the novel within this theoretical context, the paper explores how pervasive surveillance technologies, depicted in the narrative, move beyond passive observation to actively shape and manipulate human behaviour, thereby reducing individuals to mere data points optimized for profit. This relationship illustrates the detrimental effects of data-centric systems on personal freedom. Focusing on significant events, particularly those involving the protagonist, Mae Holland, the analysis addresses the gradual erosion of personal freedoms in a society dominated by digital platforms. The narrative's portrayal of technological encroachment serves as a critical lens to interrogate broader issues, such as the loss of privacy, the erosion of independent thought, and the diminishing capacity for authentic self-expression. These issues resonate deeply with current fears regarding the expanding reach of surveillance technologies and their potential to alter human agency. The study contributes to the discourse on surveillance capitalism by addressing the ethical challenges and societal repercussions of unregulated digital environments. It underscores the substantial role that literature, as exemplified by *The Circle*, plays in resolving the ethical issues associated with technology. It promotes the integration of moral principles into the operations of technology companies and advocates for a reevaluation of society's relationship with digital platforms. It also encourages a human-focused approach to technology development and warns against the unchecked commercialization of personal data.

KEYWORDS: Surveillance Capitalism, Digital Technology, Privacy Erosion, Data Exploitation, The Circle.

INTRODUCTION

In an era of unprecedented technological advancement, Shoshana Zuboff's notion of surveillance capitalism is an essential framework for comprehending the interplay between corporate authority, autonomy, and individual data. It entails companies commodifying personal information to predict and manipulate behaviour, exerting significant power over individuals and society (Zuboff, 2019a, p. 13). Dave Eggers' *The Circle* delves into this concept, depicting a dystopian society where a powerful tech company prioritizes transparency over personal freedom. It critiques the charming allure of technological progress and reveals how business organizations manipulate users into surrendering their privacy.

The protagonist, Mae Holland, becomes deeply immersed in the company's culture, broadcasting her daily life, which erodes her personal autonomy. Meanwhile, Mae's friend Annie participates in PastPerfect, a program that exposes troubling family histories and leads to her emotional collapse. The company's values lead to devastating consequences, including the death of Mae's ex-boyfriend Mercer, whose rejection of its culture strains their relationship. Through these pivotal events, the novel critically examines the perils of sacrificing personal privacy in pursuing unchecked technological progress.

The narrative envisions a future in which individuals willingly exchange their privacy for transparency, emphasizing the current environment and the intrusion of monitoring technologies into personal privacy.

Building on these themes, this study examines how Eggers' fictional portrayal of technological control aligns with and extends Zuboff's insights into surveillance capitalism. Investigating this intersection highlights the urgent need for critical engagement with the ethical implications of technology in everyday life. *The Circle*'s integration of social media, finance, and communication exemplifies Zuboff's concept of predicting and fabricating human behaviour (Zuboff, 2019b).

Furthermore, the novel's depiction of constant monitoring and its effects on the characters, who retreat into seclusion to safeguard their privacy, highlights the pervasive fear and paranoia that are reminiscent of George Orwell's *1984*, in which individuals' thoughts and actions are similarly restricted by invasive oversight. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for working toward a future that prioritizes human dignity over corporate interests.

1. THE ALLURE AND ENSLAVEMENT OF MAE HOLLAND

In *The Circle*, Dave Eggers examines the potential dangers of excessive technological influence on personal autonomy through the experiences of Mae Holland. Mae is initially captivated by The Circle's campus, referring to it as "heaven," which reflects her enthusiasm for the company's progressive ethos and communal ideal. Nonetheless, this fascination swiftly transforms into a blind spot, concealing her recognition of the gradual deterioration of her limits. Eggers examines Mae's progressive absorption into The Circle's culture of openness, illustrating how such settings, masquerading as innovation, may infringe upon individual freedom, transforming an ostensibly perfect workplace into a realm of monitoring and control. Phrases like "Dream," "Participate," "Find Community," "Innovate," and "Imagine" initially appear to encourage creativity but promote conformity masked as empowerment. Meanwhile, amenities such as "the company's daycare" (Eggers, 2013, p. 6) create a false sense of belonging, while simultaneously establishing a deeper level of surveillance and control, where autonomy is eroded through corporate structures disguised as community.

At the same time that Mae becomes more entangled in the company's activities, she recognizes that this environment prioritizes institutional power over genuine individual freedom, exposing a future in which privacy is systematically dismantled. The omnipresent monitoring begins in a subtle manner, most notably through the retinal interface, which exemplifies how surveillance is smoothly interwoven into daily life. A distressing scene occurs when Mae sees her name and "her high school yearbook photo" displayed in an elevator (Eggers, 2013, p. 8). This provides a striking example of The Circle's intrusive monitoring techniques, which blur the boundaries between public and personal identification. This incident brings to light the unsettling reality that personal histories are becoming marketable assets. This resembles Zuboff's idea of the "extraction imperative" which stresses the relentless harvesting of personal data as "free raw material" for the benefit of corporations (Zuboff, 2019a, p. 62). Moreover, the company's access to her entire medical history, including details from "her first checkup before starting kindergarten," (Eggers, 2013,

p. 86) represents a serious violation of her autonomy. Eggers criticizes corporate culture through Mae's experience, which conditions individuals to see constant surveillance not only as normal but as a moral obligation for transparency. Rather than merely exploiting individuals, Eggers illustrates how surveillance capitalism transforms identities and aspirations, as Mae internalizes the concept that her transparency is essential for the cohesiveness of society. This insight deepens Zuboff's warning that surveillance capitalism transcends mere prediction; it actively modifies behaviour and redefines selfhood, illustrating a significant shift in power dynamics in the digital age.

The constant upgrading of devices and the introduction of TruYou symbolize The Circle's seduction of innovation, further integrating Mae's data into the company's infrastructure while obscuring the erosion of her autonomy. TruYou consolidates all of Mae's online activities into "a single account" (Eggers, 2013, p. 16), controlling her digital footprint and leaving her no room for personal discretion. Furthermore, with access to her online activity trail, the company wields substantial influence over Mae's decision-making processes and forces her to internalize and adhere to its mantras of "SECRETS ARE LIES, SHARING IS CARING, and PRIVACY IS THEFT" (Eggers, 2013, p. 168). The Circle uses tools like TruYou to commodify individual behavior, violating privacy rights and giving certain people excessive power. This corporate ethos equates privacy with betrayal, resonating with Zuboff's concept of instrumentarianism, which refers to using technological systems to observe, predict, and modify human behaviour for monetization and control. By aligning individual actions with corporate interests, it subverts autonomy and encourages self-regulation (Zuboff, 2019a, p. 352). As Byung-Chul Han (2015) argues, the ideal of transparency pressures individuals to conform, thereby creating a culture of self-surveillance in which people, influenced by societal pressure, voluntarily engage in their monitoring. This dynamic reinforces The Circle's dominance over its employees and users.

This commodification reaches its peak with the SeeChange program, which mandates Mae to wear a camera around her neck that broadcasts her daily life to the world. Mae's life becomes a subject of surveillance, her every action commodified under the guise of radical transparency. Initially, Mae believes this is a fun way of aligning herself with business goals, but she gradually loses her autonomy as her ever-watching audience now has round-the-clock access to her life. Zuboff's concept of "behavioral surplus" (Zuboff, 2019b, p. 11) illustrates how The Circle derives profit from Mae's personal data, while Tene and Polonetsky (2013) argue that self-surveillance leads to self-censorship and behaviour modification, evident in Mae's conformity to viewer

expectations. Bailey, The Circle's charismatic co-founder known for encouraging innovation, asserts that continuous surveillance is essential for promoting ethical behaviour, echoing the company's radical transparency that "when you know you're being watched . . . you perform your best self" (Eggers, 2013, p. 165, 181). This belief that monitoring enhances morality is a distortion of reality, as Zuboff contends that surveillance capitalism aims to shape behaviour to serve corporate ends, rather than to promote ethical standards (Zuboff, 2019a). Mae's choice of almonds instead of brownies reflects this since her decision is driven by fear of judgment rather than true preference. This shift from observation to intervention shows how surveillance undermines personal empowerment and aligns individual actions with corporate objectives. Michel Foucault's (1977) notion of panopticism supports this, suggesting that constant observation leads to self-regulation and compliance. However, Foucault critiques this behavior as a negative consequence of disciplinary power, as it forces characters like Mae to alter their actions to meet corporate expectations, highlighting the oppressive influence of external scrutiny on personal identity and performance. Similarly, Deleuze's idea of "societies of control" complements this by suggesting that frameworks nudge behaviour to meet corporate standards without coercion, where compliance is facilitated through self-monitoring and transparency, demonstrating control operates through voluntary conformity (1992, p. 5).

Additionally, Mae's transformation deepens as she is pressured to prioritize her online presence over personal relationships. When she fails to broadcast her kayaking trip, her viewership drops, reinforcing the company's demand for constant social media activity. The relentless pressure to share every aspect of her life is highlighted by Gina's assertion that "we consider your online presence to be integral to your work here" (Eggers, 2013, p. 55). This echoes Zuboff's notion of instrumentarian power, in which forced participation shapes behaviour for corporate profit (2019a). Mae's independence is compromised due to her ongoing engagement with her audience, which causes her to adopt the company's vision and erodes her personal identity. This scenario illustrates Andrejevic's assertion that surveillance integrated into the work process functions as a mechanism for perpetuating capitalist interests by increasing productivity without directly compensating workers. By monitoring and controlling workers' actions, surveillance helps maximize efficiency, turning individuals into resources to be optimized for profit (Andrejevic, 2004).

Using technologies such as LuvLuv demonstrates substantial privacy violations by converting Mae's private moments with Francis into data points, thereby removing the intimacy of those experiences. Zuboff's criticism of the obtrusive character of surveillance

capitalism is closely aligned with the commercialization of human relationships, raising ethical concerns about personal boundaries and the exploitation of private information (Zuboff, 2019a). Adding to this, Frank Pasquale describes society as a "black box" in which organizations are constantly tracking individuals who usually remain unaware of the degree of the data gathered or its possible consequences (Pasquale, 2015, p. 568). This hidden monitoring technology makes people feel helpless as they are reduced to mere tools within a large corporate network, reflecting the culture of emotional capitalism, where emotions are commodified and evaluated (Illouz, 2007). The slogan "Community First" ultimately reveals its irony, since this constructed community prioritizes conformity over individuality, stifling authentic self-expression. The final phase of Mae's transformation occurs when she becomes entirely absorbed into the system, spending all her time performing for others. Her autonomy is compromised, leading to her being viewed as an object. The company sees her online abilities as "a new skill", allowing her to appear "utterly serene and even cheerful, while, in her skull, all was chaos" (Eggers, 2013, p. 178). This internal conflict reveals the psychological cost of corporate domination, as Mae suppresses her true thoughts and emotions to maintain a controlled outward image.

2. MERCER'S RESISTANCE TO TECHNOLOGICAL SURVEILLANCE

The Circle explores the tension between those who embrace technological progress and those who resist its intrusive impact on personal autonomy. Mercer, Mae's ex-boyfriend, serves as a voice of dissent, demonstrating a critical awareness of the surveillance state and its implications for individual freedom. He frequently criticizes The Circle's practices and debates with Mae about the consequences of constant online connectivity. During a discussion with Mae, Mercer condemns The Circle's mission to encourage ultimate transparency, which is supported by Stenton, a strategic hire for his pivotal role in promoting the company's transparency agenda, who states that "transparency is something we advocate here at The Circle" (Eggers, 2013, p. 115). Mercer warns Mae against adopting the ideologies of The Circle, pointing out her monotonous lifestyle, explaining, "here's the thing, and it's painful to say this to you. But you're not very interesting anymore. You sit at a desk twelve hours a day and you have nothing to show for it except some numbers that won't exist or be remembered in a week. You're leaving no evidence that you lived. There's no proof" (Eggers, 2013, p. 145). This highlights the negative impact of digital platforms on genuine human connections. Mercer notes that Mae's indoctrination by The Circle results in a loss of

meaningful engagement in her life and a diminished sense of identity, reducing her to a mere instrument within the company.

Another significant moment occurs when Mae shares a photo of one of Mercer's chandeliers and shares it on The Circle's social media platforms. She is impressed by the number of likes, comments, and rankings the chandelier receives. Conversely, Mercer disapproves of Mae's choice to publicize his work online, viewing it as an infringement on his privacy and personal agency. He also believes that The Circle has influenced Mae, driving her to post his chandeliers in the digital marketplace. Mercer is offended by the idea that his creation has been reduced to mere digital content. Frustrated by The Circle's intrusive practices, Mercer asserts, "I can't send you emails, because you immediately forward them to someone else. I can't send you a photo, because you post it on your own profile" (Eggers, 2013, p. 77). This highlights the loss of personal control and the superficial nature of online interactions, which he compares to "snack food" (Eggers, 2013, p. 77), suggesting they prioritize quantity over genuine connection. This is consistent with Zuboff's viewpoint on the commodification of human experience (Zuboff, 2019a), eroding authentic relationships and individual autonomy. This transformation complicates the pursuit of true autonomy and jeopardizes personal privacy by framing interactions within a commercial context. Han's observation further supports this by suggesting that constant surveillance turns a transparent society into one dominated by control (Han, 2015). Similarly, Morozov's critique of solutionism demonstrates the risks associated with viewing every human problem as something that can be resolved solely through technology and data. He contends that this viewpoint fails to recognize the complex nature of human values, as illustrated by Mae's reduced sense of self within the tech-centric Circle. Mercer's remark functions as a critique of Mae's conformity, underlining her transformation from a unique individual to a mere data generator in a surveillance-driven economy (Morozov, 2013). In a tense confrontation, Mercer rebukes Mae, declaring, "no one is forcing you to do this. You willingly tie yourself up to these leashes. And you willingly become utterly socially autistic" (Eggers, 2013, p. 145). His words imply that Mae's involvement in the digital world has deprived her of authenticity and emotionally alienated her from others, as she willingly submits to the surveillance culture, tying herself to the 'leashes' of The Circle.

Worried that Mae is losing herself to The Circle's technologies, Mercer writes Mae a letter denouncing The Circle's surveillance culture, remarking, "Mae, I've never felt more that there is a cult taking over the world" (Eggers, 2013, p. 144). He highlights how Mae's behaviour has taken a toll on their relationship and scolds her for prioritizing digital interactions over human interactions, adding, "I can't be your friend and also part of your experiment. I'll be sad to lose you, as you have been important in my life. But we've taken very different evolutionary paths, and very soon, we'll be too far apart to communicate" (Eggers, 2013, p. 201). Finally, he urges Mae to think about the consequences of her actions. He escapes the digital intrusion and pervasive surveillance by "moving north, to the densest and most uninteresting forest" (Eggers, 2013, p. 236) he could find. Mercer's retreat to the forest symbolizes his desperate attempt to escape a surveilled world. However, as part of Mae's presentation on SoulSearch, an app designed to track individuals, The Circle exploits its capabilities to locate Mercer. The live broadcast reveals him being pursued by a drone and a mob, culminating in his tragic suicide by driving off a cliff. This is consistent with Zuboff's claim that continuous monitoring weakens individual autonomy and safety. Similarly, it is stressed that perpetual monitoring adversely affects mental well-being, fostering an environment characterized by anxiety and fear (Presley, 2015). Eggers extends this view, arguing that absorption in technology can diminish personal freedom and mental resilience, causing individuals to become disconnected from genuine experiences and meaningful relationships.

3. THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGICAL CONTROL ON MAE'S PARENTS

Modern technology, in particular surveillance cameras, has become an essential instrument for ensuring the safety and well-being of individuals, especially in situations requiring close monitoring. Mae installed SeeChange cameras in her parents' home to monitor her father's health and ensure his safety after learning he had multiple sclerosis. These cameras constantly broadcast her parents' activities to the world, and they become unsettled by the nonstop visibility (Rana, 2021, p. 75). In an attempt to protect their privacy, Mae's parents disable the cameras. Mae views this rebellious act from her parents as rude and fails to see the act for what it truly is: an expression of their desire to live private lives away from The Circle's observation. Instead of protecting their dignity, Mae promises to talk to them as advised by Dr. Villalobos, the company's medical expert. Mae disregards the importance of privacy (Maharani & Yeny, 2019) and is more concerned with upholding The Circle's views on transparency than respecting her parents' wishes to be free from the internet (MacKinnon, 2013). Zuboff highlights how surveillance capitalism extracts data and treats it as a commodity (2019a). In this instance, Mae's parents are viewed as data subjects by The Circle, where their lives can be broadcasted and monitored. This

reflects the company's trend to monetize human experiences, compromising personal space.

Meanwhile, Mae's support of The Circle's technologies causes her to catch her parents in a compromising position. Eggers highlights a scene where Mae walks in on her parents during an intimate moment, and her SeeChange camera captures them performing a sexual act. Although she makes efforts to salvage the situation, Mae is met with excuses from Bailey who states, "Mae, c'mon, you know we can't do that [erase the scene]. What would transparency be if we could delete anything we felt was embarrassing in some way? You know we don't delete" (Eggers, 2013, p. 202). This footage is broadcast around the world and causes her parents embarrassment and shame. Despite their attempts to communicate their boundaries, Mae disregards their concerns. She continues recording her parents and puts them in a situation that taints their image.

Mercer also expresses how Mae's pervasive surveillance has affected her parents' lives, remarking, "they don't want to be smiled upon, or frowned upon, or zinged. They want to be alone. And not watched. Surveillance shouldn't be the tradeoff for any goddamn service we get" (Eggers, 2013, p. 201). Mercer's distress is apparent in his comment regarding Mae's parents: "I wrote this note after seeing them, both of them strung out, exhausted by the deluge you unleashed on them. It's too much, Mae. And it's not right" (Eggers, 2013, p. 201). This corresponds with Zuboff's idea of digital manipulation, wherein personal privacy is compromised as sensitive household and personal information is shared with smart devices, third parties, and unidentified individuals for purposes of predictive analysis and profit-driven sales (Zuboff, 2019a). This data extraction threatens individual autonomy and confidentiality, transforming intimate spaces into commodities to be exploited for commercial success. Likewise, Coleman (2002) discusses how the convergence of boundaries between public and private authorities involved in surveillance leads to the gradual dissolution of the distinction between personal and public life, thus increasing individuals' vulnerability to surveillance and control. This blurring of lines not only compromises personal privacy but also reinforces the power structures that thrive on constant monitoring, highlighting the dangers of unchecked surveillance in a digital age.

4. ANNIE AND THE COERCIVE NATURE OF TECHNOLOGICAL CONTROL

As a member of the "Gang of 40," a group of forty individuals who are privy to The Circle's "secret plans and data" (Eggers, 2013, p. 12)., Annie helps with all the company's big decisions and deals with regulatory issues in foreign countries. Annie's sense of self is deeply intertwined with her work, which compels her to remain committed to the organization's pledge of openness. This dedication compromises personal security and independence (Lilburn, 2015), indicated by her support to the TruYou system and SeeChange cameras. The discussion with Mae demonstrates the importance of advocating these systems, conveying how technological oversight may force employees into adhering to company policies, thereby diminishing their individuality. Annie's lament, "I just wish there were five of me" (Eggers, 2013, p. 67) shows the exhaustion she experiences at The Circle, as she is subjected to relentless pressure to meet the company's requirements and the stark contrast between her ability and the corporate demands. This tension mirrors the dynamics of surveillance capitalism, where productivity becomes a commodity, and personal well-being is often overlooked, ultimately weakening both autonomy and self-worth.

The effects of The Circle's mission of transparency do not stop at robbing Annie of her identity. As part of the company's transparency initiatives, Annie takes part in the PastPerfect program, which works to digitize and share personal family histories (Eggers, 2013, p. 192). This project reveals disturbing details about her family's involvement in slavery, which leads to her experiencing mental turmoil and facing public attention. The emotional collapse that Annie has at the end of her ordeal emphasizes the psychological harm that these intrusive devices may wreak. As Zuboff (2019a) points out, this example illustrates how digital technologies pose a threat to reputations by exposing sensitive information.

In an attempt to justify herself to the public, Annie asserts, "You also saw that they fought for the Confederate side in the Civil War," (Eggers, 2013, p. 237) emphasizing historical context rather than rationalizing their acts. This statement seeks to mitigate the impact of the revelations about her family. Nevertheless, her social circle fails to acknowledge the historical complexities and persists in condemning her, irrespective of her justification. This instance underscores the harsh and reductive nature of public opinion in the modern digital age, where the disclosure of private information frequently overshadows complex understanding. Annie tries separating herself from her ancestors' actions, but she only loses her sense of self. She asks, "what kind of people am I from? It has to be some disease in me too" (Eggers, 2013, p. 237). This incident shows that transparency and knowledge have detrimental consequences for the health and lives of people (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013). Even though she had no part in her ancestors' actions, she is still judged and ostracized for their moral failings. Annie is overwhelmed by the reactions of others and states, "if they don't shut [PastPerfect program] down, I'll go into some kind of coma. I already feel like I can barely stand or breathe"

(Eggers, 2013, p. 238). Her self-image is shattered, and the judgment she constantly receives leads to an emotional breakdown that results in her coma. This terrifying outcome emphasizes how a society fixated on total openness may lead to the deterioration of self-concept and the possibility of manipulation. Annie becomes a victim of the system she helped build and promote, showing how digital surveillance can destroy even the higher-ups.

Mae's concern for Annie's declining health serves as an additional illustration of the psychological effects of The Circle's doctrine. The clinic's tranquil environment, marked by the "rhythmic hush of the respirator" and the "hum of the machines," contrasts with Mae's state of mind. She contemplates her emotional distress, acknowledging that "yes, Mae had averted it, she'd been braver than she thought possible, but her nerves, these many months later, were still frayed" (Eggers, 2013, p. 267). This underlines the ongoing anxiety stemming from The Circle's relentless oversight. Despite her worries for Annie, Mae's acknowledgment of The Circle's milestone, "ten million people... now transparent worldwide" (Eggers, 2013, p. 267), reveals her extreme adoption of the organization's philosophy, which is celebrated as a step toward "a new and glorious openness" (Eggers, 2013, p. 268). This highlights Mae's complete immersion in The Circle's surveillance culture, where the loss of privacy is not seen as a concern but rather as a positive progression. Her celebration of this milestone marks her shift from skepticism to full alignment with the company's ideology, signaling the final erosion of her autonomy and individuality.

6. CONCLUSION

Dave Eggers' *The Circle* offers a stark criticism of surveillance capitalism, highlighting the erosion of individuality and privacy through the unchecked commodification of personal data. Through Mae's embrace of transparency, Eggers shows how individuals can become complicit in their surveillance, captivated by promises of convenience and connection. Mae's transformation warns of the cost of sacrificing privacy for visibility, making her both a champion and a casualty of The Circle's ideology. In contrast, Annie's breakdown, following the exposure of her ancestors' history, highlights the trauma of mandatory transparency, as it strips people of control over their personal narratives. Similarly, Mercer's retreat to the forest underscores how escape is the only option for some when constant visibility is demanded. His fate reflects the cost of resisting surveillance in a society that values exposure over autonomy. Mae's parents, initially supportive but later devastated by surveillance in their home, represent the impact on family life and personal boundaries. Their

distress shows how forced transparency damages relationships and leaves individuals vulnerable to a society increasingly devoid of empathy for privacy.

Eggers critiques not only corporate power but also society's complicity in enabling invasive practices. Mae's rise contrasts with the struggles of Annie, Mercer, and her parents, highlighting a world that rewards compliance and marginalizes dissenters. This outcome criticizes how surveillance capitalism reshapes society, rewarding those who conform and punishing those who resist.

Ultimately, *The Circle* urges readers to confront the implications of pervasive monitoring and protect personal privacy and autonomy. In line with Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism, Eggers calls for ethical responsibility, showing how freedom is easily lost in systems that prioritize visibility over humanity.

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