

## Normalizing Surveillance in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*

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One's private life may be what makes a life worth living. One needs a place of one's own – an escape from the public life. One's happiest moments are probably those which give one separate space and time to live by one's own norms and habits. These, at least appear to be some of the underlying assumptions that guide Dave Eggers when he imagines a world almost devoid of privacy in *The Circle*, a novel concerned with public faces and private desires, including the desire for privacy and the desire for relentless publicity that some see in social media at present. What if this individual desire – the space and time that one longs for – becomes a sign of the “other” in a society constantly monitored by a modern surveillance system that requires total transparency, including the visibility of our most personal space to the public, the novel asks? How would such an imagined society function where there is one standard of behavior and one set of fixed rules to follow under the reach of one company? What would happen to those who would not be willing to follow these rules or norms? And most importantly, what might be lost in a world where people conform fully to the ideals that guide the system of surveillance? Can surveillance shift from being a means of assessing and correcting behavior and activity, to the essence of activity itself, such that a world becomes defined less by its ideals and more by practices that subject it to constant public inspection, a world where the annihilation of privacy is the goal of social life?

These questions are explored in Dave Eggers' dystopian novel *The Circle*. The novel tells the story of Mae Holland and her metamorphosis as she goes from being a new employee to the face of the company. She starts “going transparent” (Eggers 304) by broadcasting her every moment “through the lens worn around her neck, a window into this new world” (307). This lens shares her entire life as it is lived online for all to see and comment upon. The book is a work of dystopian fiction that touches on a number of key features of contemporary digital sociality, as well as providing a new vision of the sort of total social surveillance first explored in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

*The Circle* is an attempt to understand the ambivalence related to the discipline and control social media exercises and to narrate a story of what our future could look like in a world monopolized by such regulatory norms. The novel is also a thought experiment that is designed to challenge a narrative that some might offer of the obvious goodness and morality of sharing oneself online as so many do. The very language of “sharing” captures much of this benevolence. Social media platforms like Facebook and Google are now inevitable parts of the lives of millions of people worldwide. The vitality and necessity of these platforms during this Covid-19 pandemic is profound. Several recent social and political revolutions can also be attributed to have been

influenced by the networking power of the social media – e.g., Black Lives Matter and the Arab Spring. Many fundraising campaigns have happened through social media that have transformed lives. But this happy story is not the whole story.

Egger's novel suggests that one must also consider the other sides of social media – that it is the social media which has created a world of digital normalization that has made our life self-centered and created huge distance among our loved ones. In fact, many cannot think about existing without social media for even a day. Many people are living a mediated, socially connected but physically distant reality all the time. They are manipulated by fabricated news stories and posts they read on social media. They may be giving up their own freedom for a chance to vicariously observe others or stay in touch. Individuals may not even know that they are being exploited, marketed to, and their thoughts and desires are being manipulated by the social media and by those who use social media platforms to reach their audiences. So subtle are many of the strategies that its victims often may not imagine that they are being exploited at all. I contend that this novel initiates significant arguments addressing the importance of privacy in an age of digital surveillance. As a methodology, I return to Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975) to bring its key issues – especially the genealogy of discipline in the eighteenth and nineteenth century that leads to a society that seeks to normalize individuals – into the discussion of the surveillance system of the technology company the Circle in *The Circle*. This means that my analysis will break with the obvious visual nature of surveillance as it is often studied (Lyon et al. 3). In contrast to this approach, my focus will be on mechanisms of social policing and regulation, not literal public visibility of the sort that concerns so many in Surveillance Studies. I will show that *The Circle* explores what might be the final stage of a system of social regulation that Foucault locates at the end of the eighteenth century during a time when the ruling classes confronted the problem of how best to manage and control free and democratic societies and developed practices of education, religion, and employment rituals that would generate docility and conformity. Whereas surveillance studies are concerned with tactics of observation meant to control behavior, Eggers' depicts a world in which being tracked is no longer a tactic: it is the norm and the social ideal at the heart of modern social life.

My research belongs to a tradition of repurposing some of the ideas and itineraries of thought that Foucault has pursued that are shared with Marxism. I would agree with Mark Olseen, who contends that “Although he was often critical of Marxism, Foucault's own approach bears striking parallels to Marxism, as a form of method, as an account of history, and as an analysis of social structure” (454). As I have analyzed Foucault's concept of disciplinary power in this article, it should be emphasized that “in analyzing disciplinary power, Foucault saw a kindred spirit in Marx” who recognized that power could be “exercised” (Sherman) throughout different institutions outside the state. Even though *The Order of the Things* criticizes Marx's “economic doctrine,” “it is not a total rejection of Marxism” (Kelly). On the other hand, Foucault's “anti-humanist position was not in itself anti-Marxist...” (Kelly). In several ways, my argument is closer to Marx's in the sense that I emphasize a top-down centralized model of power (Marx) that happens to be elaborated through everyday social media that is decentralized (Foucault).

I place my perspective on *The Circle* into conversation with several critics who have offered recent analyses of the novel. As I will show, my argument differs from theirs because I contend *The Circle* offers a dystopian perspective on a world of total surveillance that reflects

upon the vitality of privacy and explores its complex nature. The novel considers the usefulness of a binary conception that imagines privacy to be a domain of freedom and publicity to be a domain of social control. Such a structure makes little sense, however, if one follows Foucault and appreciates how privacy can be a space of aggressive self-regulation and the public can be a space of surprising freedom if one is willing to challenge convention. The novel thus considers the unstable power dynamics that always structure operations of surveillance and social regulation and how that instability leads to opportunities for alteration and change of the sort that is presently visible, for example, at so many Black Lives Matters protests. Unlike a contemporary world in which social media can tactically publicize otherwise private and unacknowledged acts, Egger's dystopia emphasizes the emergence of absolute publicity and the loss of any individual unmonitored existence in which individuals come to exist only to share their lives with others and lose the freedom to make choices not sanctioned by a public that is always watching.

*The Circle* depicts the frustrated and fractured future of such a world dominated by pervasive technology. The novel is an attempt to argue that social media technology seeks to normalize individuals in ways that make social discipline pervasive, subtle, and, above all else, effective in normalizing individuals such that each begins to appear "like one another" (Foucault 182). Eggers appears to offer a perspective like Foucault's, however, who once also insisted that "power is everywhere" (Foucault 93) and this means that social relations are not defined by those who have power and those who do not. Instead, counter hegemonic resistance is always possible; one is never without access to these relations of power and the possibility that one could mount a form of spirited resistance that can destabilize this power structure. However, this novel also explores how such resistance fails. Ultimately, the novel often shows the inner struggles and desperation of the central characters to get rid of the dominant power structure – the visible power of the company – that has made their lives suffocating and distressing. But perhaps because individuals remain isolated from one another – and indeed much of the plot of the novel revolves around the secrecy of individual rebellions that never quite reveal themselves to one another – there is not a great and substantial moment of rebellion. *The Circle* is an attempt to chart the failures of resistance and rebellion that may follow from such a world in which individuals confuse visibility with social life, and no longer forge meaningful alliances that might lead to revolution. The novel asks readers to wonder if contemporary social media self-surveillance can lead to a coercive existence in which excessive visual transparency erases any sort of privacy and sacrifices freedom to the ideology of openness. At the end, the novel also imagines why resistance of any sort might become futile, especially if individuals fail to work together and instead protest alone.

*The Circle* 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-organized dormitory rooms, gymnasium, beautiful campus, hotels and restaurants, theatre, etc. The Circle was founded by Ty Gospodinov, who brought all the social media profiles and other accounts of the users into one platform which he named TruYou: "one account, one identity, one password, one payment system, per person" (21). The company develops technology that becomes pervasive across the United States and eventually the world. They invent SeeChange cameras to make everyone visible and accountable. In one of the Great Hall presentations, one of the company's CEOs, Eamon Bailey, announces that "all that happens must be known" (67) and this captures the company's aggressive assault on privacy.

Mae's supervisors gradually indoctrinate her into the company's norms. Mae finds that "this is not a clock in clock out company" but an entire lifestyle (Eggers 176). She starts living in the campus even on weekends and participates in all the activities which increase her PartiRank. Her co-workers and supervisors convince her that within the Circle, it is important to always engage with the community and continually develop her rank in the company. Mae, however, keeps her connection with her parents and her ex-boyfriend Mercer and she often goes kayaking in the weekends. But with the constant vigilance and reminders of her co-workers and supervisors, Mae starts giving all her time to the campus. Although Mae often feels that her privacy is being erased, she becomes more attached to the Circle. Her conversations with Bailey on the effects of surveillance indoctrinate Mae fully as she willingly becomes transparent and broadcasts her life to the world, embodying the company's philosophies of surveillance: "sharing is caring," "secrets are lies" and "privacy is theft" (303).

Meanwhile, Mercer's and Mae's parents become unsettled by the twenty-four-hour visibility conditions of the Circle. They warn Mae of the terrible consequences of such excessive social networking. Alongside this thread of concern, the novel develops another: Mae often meets the mysterious figure of Kalden on the campus, a man who is against the monopoly of the Circle. Kalden warns Mae about the "totalitarian nightmare" (481) emerging from the Circle's proposal to control voting and he suggests that Mae should use her power to bring the company to its limit. But Mae's absolute commitment to the company's vision becomes so powerful that she does not leave her position even after the murder of Mercer, the broadcast of the sex video of her parents and Annie's (Mae's close friend and an employee of the Circle) hospitalization – all of which are the effects of the Circle surveillance. Mae does not listen to the suggestions of Kalden – who is the company's founder, Ty – to stop the completion of the Circle. Instead, Mae wants to discover how to know the thoughts of Annie, who is in a coma now.

Such a plot might remind some of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in which Winston Smith is also a transformed person at the end of the novel where he recognizes that he loves Big Brother. By forcing everyone to be under the constant vigilance of the telescreens and subject to state ideology, Airstrip One maintains its power in Orwell's novel. Is *The Circle* a modern version of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? Although they seem to be similar in some aspects of surveillance and totalitarianism, they are significantly different from each other. In *The Circle*, no one forces Mae to do anything. By the end of the novel, Mae enters a stage of willing servitude. On the other hand, Winston Smith is forced to transform. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, there are only telescreens to keep the citizens under surveillance but in *The Circle*, we see a modern social networking system that dominates the lives of the users through what Zygmunt Bauman calls "seduction" (Lyon 327) and what Michel Foucault would term "normalization" (308). The power structures in these two novels are very different: one has top down structure and the other has a networked structure of power. Hence, the process and the effect of surveillance in these two texts are substantially different.

The literal form of surveillance in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is in absolute contrast with the surveillance in Foucault's carceral society, as David Lyon has explored. This debate is important for understanding what one means by surveillance, how and where it occurs, and what its effects include. Where Big Brother involves a totalitarian state that is always watching and ready to punish

transgressors, Foucault notes a more elemental form of discipline that characterizes free and open societies in which individuals learn to monitor themselves and regulate their desires and actions according to social norms rather than overt acts of correction. Lyon further notes that in electronic surveillance system, the modern concept of a “human-centered self” is replaced by the “remote databases” (62) that store our personal details and make us the bearers of our own surveillance that assures the “certainty of punishment” (Lyon 70), although one may be unable to “verify” (Lyon 68) the power source. Although “Orwell places less emphasis on the subjects being the bearer of their own surveillance,” the citizens of Foucault’s disciplinary society are the bearers of the power that dominates them (Lyon 66). While writing about resistance, Lyon highlights the “distant roar of battles,” arguing that Foucault “abandoned” (76) the probability of resistance in his modern disciplinary societies. Lyon finishes the essay by contending that “Orwell’s dystopic vision was dominated by the central state” and that modern forms of surveillance rely much more on decentralized electronic dominance in a world of consumerism (Lyon 78).

Although I agree with most of Lyon’s analysis of the modern electronic surveillance, I disagree with his argument that Foucault abandoned the idea of the possibility of resistance against such power. I contend that Lyon misses what Foucault argued about the concept of power – that “power is everywhere” (Foucault 93) and its structure is relational rather than the traditional top-down style of the sort seen in the police state imagined by *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. I observe that *The Circle* has a power structure that is best understood with Foucault’s insights and understanding regarding the volatility of relations of power. And because power comes from no single source but from multiple relays and relations, there are always possibilities of resistance, including what Marxists would call “relative autonomy” or the possibilities for change that are included within a system designed to still revolutionary impulses (Parker 227). I would argue that the relative autonomy that we observe in *The Circle* through the characters like Mercer and Ty are the effects of the relational power structure of the world in the novel. My argument regarding the establishment of surveillance as a norm in itself relies on these complex relations of power and resistance.

The loss of privacy in modern data surveillance system is one of the most significant matters in *The Circle*. This issue is taken up by Scott Selisker in his “The Novel and WikiLeaks: Transparency and the Social Life of Privacy” where he focuses on the differences in privacy between a “democratic and the totalitarian state” (Selisker 765). He brings in Nelson’s observation that a totalitarian state “penetrates” (765) into private lives. Selisker refers to Jonathan Crary’s *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* which shows that in neo-liberalism, most of our social relations are transferred into “monetized and quantifiable forms” such that “privacy is impossible” in a context where an individual “becomes a permanent site of data-harvesting and surveillance” (qtd. in Selisker 765). Selisker argues that “*The Circle* ...explores...what we may lose by not safeguarding our privacy” (766). He asserts that “total transparency renders Mae surprisingly inert” (770). Mae loses her opportunities to have meaningful private communications. I agree that losing one’s privacy is central to the novel, but my discussion of the erasure of privacy in *The Circle* arises from my contention that modern form of data surveillance becomes, in the novel, a social norm in itself rather than a tactic designed to regulate individuals to make them docile governable subjects.

The normalization that happens with our constant awareness to our public self or to our visibility through social media or surveillance is further analyzed by Oliver Muller in his essay “Being Seen: An Exploration of a Core Phenomenon of Human Existence and Its Normative Dimensions.” He argues that “being seen obliges us to follow and even to comply with certain social and moral orders” (Muller 368). Citing Blumenberg, he observes that “the possibility of being seen challenges our self-image and gives rise to ‘the calculated self-display and playful self-portrayal’” (qtd. in Muller 369). These realizations reflect Foucault’s concept of the “normalizing judgement” (Foucault 177) in modern disciplinary society because, as Blumenberg further elaborates, “the human being is...constantly transversed and determined by the gaze of others” (qtd. in Muller 369). While “investigating the right to be invisible in the context of surveillance technologies” (375), Muller takes up Foucault’s statement that “visibility is a trap” (Foucault 200) and asserts that “visibility can be instrumentalized in surveillance technologies and disciplinary regimes” (Muller 375). In the context of *The Circle*, “transparency ...can also be a trap” (Muller 375). Muller further argues that the “omniscient gaze” in the novel has “totalitarian...gaze” in the tradition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*” and “the Big Brother of our times emerges from an obsessive self-display...” (376). Roy Sommer, however, does not consider Big Brother as an issue of the “new kind of surveillance culture” (Sommer 53) that we see in *The Circle*. He claims that “the greatest risk to individual freedom, Eggers reminds us, is no longer Big Brother but the naive (and greedy) user who unwittingly pays for the ‘free’ services of the web browsers and social networks with the gold and oil of the digital age: personal data” (Sommer 53). Sommer contends that “like the sirens of the Greek mythology, who promised errant sailors secret knowledge of the world but killed them once they set foot on shore, these computer networks seduce us to agree to terms and conditions that will enslave us” (Sommer 53).

I mostly agree with Muller and Sommer’s understanding of digital personal data visibility as a kind of trap in Foucault’s sense of the word. Although they have taken a different stance in viewing the gaze of the Circle, I share their fascination with how normalization involves transparency and the propagation of liberal humanist values of freedom of choice alongside the process of seducing the consumers. Unlike them, however, I contend that resistance to a technological gaze that penetrates our private lives and data is possible because of the fragile and suspicious nature of the power structure of such regimes of surveillance.

How does *The Circle* explore the notions of electronic surveillance and the integration of disciplinary forms of social media into everyday life? One way of approaching this question may be to notice that a society of control and normalization may not be the overt ambition of the Circle. The Circle’s major technological ambitions work to “realize” the “potential” of human beings (Eggers 292). The SeeChange cameras might protect “human rights” (65); TruYouth can “make kids safer” (342); SoulSearch boasts the capability to catch the “fugitive from justice” (446). Why should a technology company provide such great but very costly services for its users? They must have a plan to get their invested capital back in multiplied forms and this is what Marx argued about such “capital” – “money that is used to make more money” (Parker 213). Surveillance begins as a means to an economic end.

While teaching Mae about “Conversion Rate” (Eggers 248) and “Retail Raw” (250), Gina emphasizes that “the Circle would not exist, and would not grow... if there were not actual purchases being made, actual commerce spurred. We’re here to be a gateway to all the world’s

information, but we are supported by advertisers who hope to reach customers through us, right?” (248). Hence, the Circle’s ultimate monetary purpose reinforces the central Marxist reality: “getting and keeping economic power is the motive behind all social and political activities, including education, philosophy, religion, government, the arts, science, technology, the media, and so on” (Tyson 54). Gina explicates that everything an employee of the Circle does is supposed to “spur” action of the consumers – “to provoke” and “to stimulate purchases” (248). By using one’s “credibility,” one can increase the “conversation rate” (248). And the credibility of an employee like Mae in the Circle is created through a network of extraordinary initiatives that revolutionize the social media platform by technological innovation which is supposed to create a world of transparency and availability.

Although “Ty invented TruYou” (21), Bailey and Stenton “monetized” (23) it. They “found ways to reap funds from all of Ty’s innovations, and it was they who grew the company into the force that subsumed Facebook, Twitter, Google, and finally Alacrity, Zoopa, Jefe, and Quan” (23). They have commodified the system and the activities of users of TruYou enrich the Circle. Senator Williamson launches an “investigation into whether or not the Circle acts as a monopoly” that violates “free market capitalism” (173) in a brief episode in which Eggers again emphasizes that the company is a “shark like entity” (476) who would “devour” (477) everything in its path with “ruthless capitalistic ambition” (484).

To fulfil their disguised monetary ambition, the Circle first propagates several “imploring messages of inspiration” : “Dream, Participate, Find Community, Innovate, Imagine, Breathe,” amidst a “vast and rambling campus” below the “spotless and blue sky” (1). After Mae Holland’s initiation into the Circle campus, one of her supervisors, Dan, shares the company’s “core beliefs” (46) with her: “...it must be a community. That’s one of our slogans... This isn’t a sweatshop... this is a place where our humanity is respected, where our opinions are dignified, where our voices are heard – this is as important as any revenue, any stock price, any endeavor undertaken here” (47). “Communication” “Understanding,” and “Clarity” are the “mission of the company” (47). While presenting the wireless SeeChange cameras that can ensure “transparency,” “documentation,” and “accountability” – from which “tyrants can no longer hide” – Bailey “insists that all that happen must be known” (67) and “we will become all-seeing, all knowing” (70). Bailey “believes in the perfectibility of human beings” (291) who would behave as if they are “being watched” (290). The Circle does not appear to represent a totalitarian future of total control, then. It is a benevolent entity that believes it is an agent of improvement that has successfully monetized its mission. But the story or surveillance in the service of perfecting humans into more ideal versions of themselves and ensuring that they remain good consumers at the same time, changes dramatically. Influenced by Bailey’s perspectives on secrets and sharing, Mae shares three of her crucial revelations in front of the Circle audience in the campus, comments that begin to reveal how such benevolence is always also normalizing in scope and effect: “SECRETS ARE LIES; SHARING IS CARING; PRIVACY IS THEFT” (303). The goal of surveillance shifts subtly at first, but eventually all that matters is that everyone broadcasts themselves in ways that successfully end privacy entirely.

As “the most influential company of the world” (Eggers 1), the Circle uses modern surveillance to establish social norms which it expresses as a set of core values that it then implements as “ideologies” (from Althusser’s perspective) or “discourses” (from Foucault’s perspective). As I will argue, these norms are “necessarily imperfect and incomplete” (Parker 259)

and therefore the “false consciousness” (Parker 228) that they create could be “resisted” (Parker 259). Although the “discourses are not absolute,” “they wield great power” (Parker 256) and the Circle ultimately normalize the values and visions that they want to “commodify” (Tyson 62) through modern surveillance system. It is therefore pertinent to first understand what Michel Foucault explored “as a historical background to various studies of the power of normalization and the formation of knowledge in modern society” (Foucault 308) – “the correlative history of the modern soul and of a new power to judge” (Foucault 23).

In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Michel Foucault explores how a once dominant form of punishment that involved the torture of “the body of the condemned” (Foucault 3) was replaced by different forms of punishment that ultimately served as the model for “disciplinary institutions” (183) with their “infinite examination and ...compulsory objectification” (189) to regulate, perfect, and “normalize” individuals in modern society. Instead of the body further being the “major target of penal repression” (8), punishment later became an issue of “certainty” (9) with an intention to “correct, reclaim, ‘cure’” (10). The idea that “punishment...should strike the soul rather than the body” (qtd. in Foucault 16) replaced “penal severity” as the primary aim of punishment (16). In this new form of justice, punishment is acted on “the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations” (16) and the judicial sentence “bears within it an assessment of normality and technical prescription for a possible normalization” (21). But “even when they use “‘lenient’ methods,” “it is always the body that is at issue – the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission” (25).

There were public protests against the spectacle of the scaffold. Hence, “it was breaking up of this solidarity that was becoming the aim of penal of police repression” (63). To face the more “widely spread” and “subtle” targets, the penal system recommended a reduced “economic and political cost” while “increasing its effectiveness and ...circuits” (89). “It is no longer the body, with the ritual play of excessive pains...it is the mind or rather a play of representations and signs circulating discreetly but necessarily and evidently in the minds of all” (101). “When you have thus formed the chain of ideas in the heads of your citizens, you will then be able to pride yourselves on guiding them and being their masters...on the soft fibres of the brain is founded the unshakable base of the soundest of Empires” (qtd. in Foucault 103). “The power that punishes” is now “hidden” (105) and it must act while concealing itself beneath the gentle force of nature” (106). “The best way of punishing them is to employ them” (106): “a slave at the service of all” (109). “This visibility of punishment was one of the fundamental principles of the new penal code” (qtd. in Foucault 112). This signifies that in the “punitive city” where there “will be hundreds of tiny theatres of punishment” (113), “the criminal will be imagined as a source of instruction” and “will become the vehicle of the law” (112).

Foucault explores the emergence of the “disciplines”, which are methods that “control the operations of the body”, and “assures the constant subjection of the forces and impose upon them a relation of docility-utility” (137). In “the art of distributions,” “discipline...requires enclosure” (141), “partitioning” (143), “registration” (144) and “ranking” – that involves “supervising, hierarchizing, rewarding” (147). In such disciplinary mechanisms, “an attempt is...made to assure the quality of the time used” by “constant supervision, the pressure of supervisors, the elimination of anything that might disturb or distract” (150). Discipline trains, improves, and corrects. “Discipline...arranges a positive economy” (154) and it “makes individuals” by power through



the “art of correct training” which involves the “hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement and...the examination” (170). Such regulation requires unique operations and structures to be effective. “The perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly” (173) where the “supervisors” are “perpetually supervised” (177). “Surveillance” works in a “network of relations” both from “top to bottom” and “bottom to top” (176) and “produces ‘power’ and distributes individuals in this permanent and continuous field” (177). In order to establish normalizing effects, “the slightest departures from the correct behavior” (178) are punished through a process of a “whole micro-penalty” where “each subject finds himself caught in a punishable, punishing universality” (178). Individuals face “a constant pressure to conform to the same model, so that they might all be subjected to ‘subordination, docility...correct practice of...all parts of discipline’” so that they will “be like one another” (182). “The perpetual penalty...compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes” and thus “normalizes.” (183). Practices of “regular observation” (186) places the “patient in a situation of almost perpetual examination” (184). Key to their functioning, however, is that these tactics largely do not appear to be a form of correction and discipline. They appear instead as norms and natural expectations, subtly enforced. “Disciplinary power...is exercised through its invisibility...and imposes on...its subjects a principle of compulsory visibility” and it is this reality of “being constantly seen...that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection” (187) while being introduced “into the field of documentation” (189).

Bentham’s architectural innovation of a prison with a central watchtower called a panopticon becomes Foucault’s most memorable figure for the notion that discipline relies on making individuals visible and that the exercise of regulatory norms is largely invisible. Any number of institutions can, in effect, place “a supervisor in a central tower...to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy” (200). The individual “is seen, but he does not see” who is observing (200) and this “induces in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (201). Because one never knows if one is being watched, one learns to self-regulate and watch oneself. The “lateral invisibility is a guarantee of order” (200): “there is no danger of a plot, an attempt at collective escape...no disorders...no coalitions” (201). The result is a society that aims to regulate individuals according to measures designed to “characterize, classify, specialize; they distribute...around a norm...and, if necessary, disqualify and invalidate” through direct means of correction (223).

*The Circle* reflects such a regulatory society. The Circle creates life-improving technology that normalizes the company’s values and works through hierarchical observation, examination, ranking and disqualification – all of which are part of direct surveillance processes. The Circle is rooted in normalization, even if that is not a goal that would appear to define its operations, making it a perfect example of a disciplinary institution. No one forces anyone to accept the company’s discourses – everyone willingly participates in acts of regulating one another. But this is not the whole story because Eggers combines this perspective with the emergence of the Circle as an autocratic company – like Big Brother in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – at least once their consumers and the entire society become deeply immersed in the company’s surveillance and there remains only one option – with no log out system – and that is to do everything through a TruYou account. As such, the novel charts the progress from discipline as a tactic to normalize and regulate a society to discipline as the goal or normalization itself.

The Circle's methods begin according to a more conventional disciplinary model in which Mae learns to internalize company values and is rewarded for doing so. Mae's supervisors play a significant role in this process with their repetition of the Circle values and works and thus establish the discourses through the actions of Mae and other employees. It is Annie who actually starts the process of surveillance over Mae, but it is perhaps less about overt claims such as "I'll be watching you" (15) and more about a consistent strategy to train and correct how Mae thinks: "Better to be at the bottom of the ladder you want to climb than in the middle of some ladder you don't, right?" (16). She fascinates Mae with "Bailey's passion project" of bringing "Musicians, comedians, writers" (17), his love for "ancient" things and his "crusade" (26) for all the treasures. "He just loves enabling the curiosity of the great young minds" (18). This primary astonishment creates a channel for future normalization of the surveillance process because Mae certainly did not expect to find such liberal minds behind the great success of a technology company. This is the moment where Gramsci's "hegemony," Althusser's "ideology" and Foucault's "discourse" (Foucault 112) or "ideologues" (Foucault 102) start to work on the "soft fibres" (Foucault 103) of Mae's brain and this is also the moment of normalization. Mae starts Feeling that she "never wanted to work – never wanted to be – anywhere else" (30). The discipline associated with the Circle acts as a regulatory force upon Mae as she comes to view herself according to the norms and values of the company.

This disciplinary environment, like any regulatory society, involves surveillance and observation followed by forms of correction. Mae understands that extracurricular activities are integral parts of the Circle. Gina introduces her with the "Participation Rank" (100) that is counted based on one's "zings...profiles...photos posted, attendance at Circle events" (100). This certainly creates a sense of competition in Mae and she starts permanently staying on campus and working even on holidays to improve her position in the Circle. Mae comes to consider herself an integral part of the Circle: "I'm all yours" (179). She internalizes the norms established by the Circle. She does not view these norms as an ideology. They appear natural to her, because she is immersed in its world.

The constant reports and demands on Mae make her fully aware of the expectations of the Circle. She becomes "a crucial member of the community" (180). Denise and Josiah expect Mae to share everything that she experiences. They emphasize that she has deprived the community of learning about her father's illness "episode" (183) by not sharing anything about it in the InnerCircle or OuterCircle accounts. Focusing their target on "Passion, Participation and Transparency" (184), Denise and Josiah then proceed towards Sunday activity of Mae and show their surprise at not seeing any post on her "kayaking" (185). They emphasize being "engaged" continuously (188) with the community. The most important point to mention here is that Mae is not upset after these apparent humiliations; she rather takes these as her failure of not being able to fulfil the expectations of the Circle. "She disgusted herself" (189) and thinks of her failure to be "a person of some value to the world" (190). There was a time when Mae enjoyed privacy. She used to kayak and appreciate that "no one could see her, and no one would ever know she was here" (Eggers 268). But when her illegal entry into the water is caught on camera, she quickly learns to internalize the expectation that she is "being watched" literally at all times (290). More, she internalizes an expectation that she shares her life with others continuously. She becomes fully "transparent" (304) after this episode and is transformed into an icon of the company by wearing

a portable “lens” (307) on her chest that broadcasts her entire life to viewers around the world. The best measure of the effectiveness of social norms may just be that one is willing to turn on oneself. Eggers offers readers a portrait of the ordinary ways in which individuals can internalize norms and regulate themselves, even noting the aggression and disgust such self-regulation can involve.

Eamon Bailey influences Mae the most in terms of normalizing the values of the Circle. After being accused of “selfishness” due to her private kayaking activities, she becomes preoccupied with “self-denunciations”: “She hated who she was” (276). Mae now tries “to do something visible to demonstrate her commitment to the company” (277). The power of norms to cultivate in Mae a mental space of self-humiliation is the emotional expression of relations of power that are designed to scrub privacy out of existence. For Mae, there are moments when secrets are precious, especially when “[they] can protect someone’s feeling” (281). Bailey, however, argues against any secret by providing examples like the value of Julian Assange’s Wikileaks and the rhetoric of benevolent improvement. Bailey contends that “any information that eludes us, anything that’s not accessible, prevents us from being perfect” (287). “Secrets are the enablers of antisocial, immoral and destructive behavior” (289). He asks, “what if we all behaved as if we were being watched?” (290). Eggers routinely stages debates such as these as a key medium for the alteration of individuals as they are bent toward norms of transparency. The exercise of power is presented as if it were a matter of reason rather than force. It is not the physical camera which normalizes. It is the sense of always being watched that makes people docile and it is via norms – like the Circle’s core values – that people come to regulate themselves.

Once she begins to broadcast her life, Mae becomes a “semi-celebrity” (376) with millions of followers who want to be like her. She is a “role model” and this fact creates “a feeling of responsibility” which “grounded and fueled her days” (329). Bailey utilizes the great popularity of Mae to continue normalizing certain values. Instead of deleting the video of Mae’s parents’ sexual encounter that was captured live on a Circle SeeChange camera, Bailey normalizes the absence of privacy, even for such sensitive phenomena: “you know we don’t delete” (369) and “when everything is known, everything acceptable will be accepted... You need to be a role model here” (370). Hence, Bailey normalizes certain values and makes anything outside of those values appear abnormal. The Circle’s visibility is no longer a tactic designed to subject individuals to normalizing pressures because it is a society governed by social norms designed to regulate behaviour and maximize social cohesion. Its visibility has become the norm in itself.

Losing one’s sense of privacy is one of the terrible consequences of the Circle’s regime of surveillance and normalization. But such losses do not go unnoticed. The novel depicts attempts by individuals, including Mae, Mercer, Ty and Annie, to keep a personal space for themselves and, therefore, the rapid loss of this space through willing self-surveillance creates marked expressions of alienation among at least some characters. Their attempts to create private spaces for meaningful communication is antagonistic to the Circle’s vision of transparency and those attempts ultimately fail. For example, in addition to kayaking alone, Mae often meets Annie (427) in secret and expresses a desire “to be alone with Kalden” (323). Kayaking gives Mae great pleasure – the pleasure of being alone with nature and thinking “if the seal knew... how lucky they were to have all this to themselves” (83). Mae “stood, breathing heavily, feeling strong, feeling enormous. What a strange thing, she thought, to be there... a private island” (267) and “because it was dark... no one would ever know she was there” (268). Like the “nest” whose “equilibrium of scents and

construction” would be “ruined” (269) if touched, Mae’s own privacy can only be destroyed by external intervention. The narrator bears witness to this recognition by observing that amidst the roar of transparency in the Circle, “the wave of despair...gathers in Mae’s chest. She’d been feeling this, this black rip, this loud tear, within her” that “didn’t ...last long” “but ...she saw a tiny tear in ...black cloth” through which she “heard the screams of the millions of invisible souls” (196). But Mae does not know “who was screaming through the tear in the cloth” (196). Resistance is everywhere and always possible; but it can be ignored, especially when it takes the form of disorganized voices expressing their individual frustrations. Such moments of resistance appear, first and foremost, as individual efforts in the novel.

Eggers exposes many of the fissures of this culture of pervasive and normalized self-surveillance through the character of Mercer. Mercer can see through the apparently fantastic Circle ideologies and discover a chained future for Circle users. He has the power to analyze different consequences of the excessive Circle surveillance. From the beginning of Mae’s employment till the visible signs of Mae’s impending tragedy, Mercer tries to show Mae the possible fatal results of the Circle and its monopoly. While talking to Mae, he notes they are “never alone” and they even look at each other “through hundred other people’s eyes” (131). Such a description nicely captures the operations of any social norm that can condition how one sees oneself or others. He argues that “the tools you guys create actually *manufacture* unnaturally extreme social needs” (133) and the users feel “wasted and hollow and diminished” (134). For Mercer, the Circle is a “cult taking over the world” and he warns Mae regarding the false “benevolence” of the Circle leaders who could “ruin” (259) anyone who would challenge the monopoly of the company. He contends that people like Mae “willingly tie” themselves “to these lashes” and become “incredibly boring” (260).

In a letter to Mae and her “audience” (366), Mercer laments the possibility of losing Mae as they have taken “very different evolutionary paths” (367) and thus emphasizes the fact that the Circle continues to manufacture a terrible world of surveillance which would end in tragedy. He further insists that “surveillance shouldn’t be the tradeoff for any goddamn service we get” and he predicts that “if things continue this way, there will be two societies – the one you’re helping to create, and an alternative to it” (367). In short, he criticizes the “constant surveillance” (367) of the “tyrannical state” that may “go too far and collapses into itself” (368). After Annie’s collapse, Mercer writes a letter to Mae again to make her consider the terrible “end” that would come to her soon (430). He contends that “our souls need the mysteries of night and the clarity of day” and the Circle’s “ever-present daylight” (430-431) and its “criminality of privacy” (432) “will burn us all alive” (431). Mercer becomes of a victim of Mae and her millions of followers whose merciless pursuit of Mercer through the “SoulSearch” (456) program results in a terrible accident that kills him. This tragic event perhaps oversimplifies things and demonstrates an area where Foucault’s sense of surveillance culture is substantially more developed than Eggers’. This sample of a multitude of happy consumers of surveillance is a proof of the Circle’s power of normalization. This also shows how such blind adherence to one set of norms can overcome deviant beliefs, especially when they are voiced by a lone individual. But if the tragedy of norms is that they can chase one out of existence, this is too high a bar. Social norms can also make life unbearable without actually killing individuals, as Foucault well knew. The goal of regulatory discipline is not the return of the gallows, but instead the creation of conditions in which individuals need not ever face the penalty of death to be kept docile and productive.

Annie's collapse and Mae's radical transformation are two parallel but totally opposite phenomena. Where Mae happily eliminates her privacy, Annie becomes evidence of the cost of doing so. The "PastPerfect" program that delves into the family history of individuals destroys Annie by bringing up her family history of slave trading (428) and by sharing the story of her parents' "open marriage" (436). "Now I don't have parents," Annie is forced to declare (440). The effect of such a search of her past is that she starts resisting the Circle beliefs: "I don't know if we should know everything" (435). The shocking consequence of such merciless pursuit of the past is that Annie collapses and goes into a "coma" (490). On the other hand, Mae remains enthralled by the company's surveillance logic and the normalization of absolute transparency, so much so that she wonders about a new technology that could capture Annie's coma thoughts: "they needed to talk about Annie, the thoughts she was thinking" (491). In brief, these two different poles of a same thread are the signs of the complex nature of the Circle in an age of microcosms of power structures where the effects of regulatory power are unequal and uneven.

The central concern of my paper involves a form of surveillance by social media that becomes both a norm of absolute public transparency as well as the foundation of social existence. Such pervasive transparency means that there "will be more Mercers" who "don't want to be found but who will be" (481) and such measures anticipate "a totalitarian nightmare" (481). Ty contends that the "closing of the Circle" will make everyone "tracked" from "cradle to grave, with no possibility of escape" (481). He observes that the Circle has "devoured" "competitors for years" and as the "90 percent of the world's searches go through the Circle," it can "control most of what anyone sees and knows" and it can "ruin anyone" within "five minutes" (482). In response to Mae's argument that "if everyone has equal access to services, to information, we finally have a chance at equality" and "if everyone's tracked, then there's no crime, no murder, no kidnapping and rape," Ty contends that the Circle's "ruthless capitalistic ambition" (484) with its "filterless society" where "secrets are crimes" (483) will re-make the world. It will be reminiscent of life in the "new aquarium" (466) where "every creature" would be "devoured by a beast" (485). He further contends that "the ceaseless pursuit of data to quantify the value of any endeavor is catastrophic to true understanding" and "we must all have the right to disappear" (485). These counter discourses are significant to resist the borderless modern-day colonization of the minds by the social media.

One may wonder why Mercer and Ty are not affected by the Circle's powerful regimes of normalization and why they resist the surveillance logic of the company. Understanding the nature of the power structure and exploring the concepts of resistance within the domain of power or ideology or discourse would help explain the context from which Mercer and Ty become the exception in the Circle. For Foucault, "power is everywhere" (177); "it comes from everywhere" (Foucault 93) and it is not "possessed as a thing, or transferred as a property; it functions like a piece of machinery...it is the apparatus as a whole that produces 'power'" (177). Power "invests" even those who 'do not have it' and it is "transmitted by them and through them" (Foucault 27). Power is found in "a network of relations" (26) which "go right down into the depths of society" (27). Foucault argues that "power produces knowledge" (Foucault 27) and "discourse" (Parker 259) and the discourses – e.g., the discourses of surveillance – "regulate, police, and surveil" (Parker 257) our "behavior and beliefs" (Parker 257). But the "discourses are not absolute" (Parker 256) and "any discourse of power...will necessarily be imperfect and incomplete" (Parker 259).

Foucault contends that “where there is power, there is resistance” and “these points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network” (95) but it does not mean that these “plurality of resistances” are “doomed to perpetual defeat”; rather, they are the “irreducible opposite” (96) to power. He emphasizes that power remains “constantly in tension” and in “perpetual battle” (26) with its internal “instability” and “struggles” that can even invert the relations of power (27).

The Circle’s power structure is not top down or bottom up or linear; it is a network of various positions, all of which are different from each other and it has contradictions and tensions within it. The biggest contradiction comes from the creator of the Circle, Ty. Even the owner cannot control the power that was originated from him: it is as if “the falcon cannot hear the falconer; Things Fall Apart” (Yeats). It is a clear proof that the Circle’s discourses have serious contradictory positions within them. The liberal Eamon Bailey seems to be totally different from the ruthless capitalist Stenton. Mae and Annie are important parts of this power structure, too. They promote many of the Circle’s ideologies through their popularity in the Circle social media platforms. There is always a force that resists the advance of power, too. Mercer and Ty create resistance but fail to manufacture what Marxists would call “collective thinking” (Parker 226); they are incapable of building up “alliances with other groups” (Parker 218). Unable to set up a “historic bloc” (Parker 218), to borrow Gramsci’s phrasing, Mercer and Ty are doomed to fail. In a world where most people broadcast their private lives for the consumption of others, such alliances seem more and more unlikely, at least if consumers conceive themselves as alone in a sea of others. By the end of the novel, it is already too late to expect any movement against the Circle, “the fucking shark that eats the world” (Eggers 480). This reflects the fact that the effect of Circle surveillance has extensively pervaded the society and it has created many highly successful but obedient TruYou users. On the other hand, Ty’s alternative option of “sailing around the world in a boat” (Eggers 486) seems ludicrous, born as it is of incredible privilege and indifference to the rest of the world. Mercer’s logic against the Circle surveillance is strong but not enough to replace the mental shackles which have softly chained Mae. Hence, although Mercer’s hope of “a new generation” who will “rise up against” and “see all this as ludicrous, oppressive, utterly out of control” (Eggers 432) is promising, the Circle has won over the soft fiber of Mae’s and her followers’ brains and thus it seems impossible to expect such a force for change to organically appear.

In order to best understand the effects associated with social surveillance in *The Circle*, one needs to carefully analyze the scenes that Eggers significantly reiterates in the novel: Mae’s private kayaking trips into the Oakland bay and the new aquarium scene with ocean-going creatures, which is telecasted live to millions of TruYou users. If kayaking primarily represented a sense of freedom and privacy, it comes to embody the extent to which visibility has become an absolute norm. Even embarking onto the ocean has become an activity policed by SeeChange cameras. By the time Mae is transformed into fully believing in the Circle’s norms of broadcasting all of one’s life, privacy no longer carries any significance for her because the distinction between a public self and a private self is now blurred by her practices of self-surveillance. But perhaps such privacy never quite existed or was never as total as it appeared. As Foucault notes, the self-regulating subject does not need to be watched and the pursuit of physical activity and associations of nature and privacy are nothing if not social norms. Mae’s kayaking excursions are themselves a particular way of embodying the norm, just a different norm than one of absolute publicity. Perhaps there was always a shark circling there, unseen but active beneath the surface. The shark

in the tank represents the Circle itself with its deadly capacity to eat everything in its path. And as anyone who has watched *Jaws* or is familiar with the social conventions associated with sharks knows, one does not need to see the shark to fear it and act accordingly. It possesses a curiously disciplinary force, thanks to how it has come to represent a particular sort of ideal of viciousness.

Both Mae (symbolically – as Mae often loves Kayaking alone in the sea) and the shark are sea creatures and although they both love to live in the water, they are invisible to each other. Mae does not know that her most private space – the vastness of the ocean – is invaded by the most dangerous creature (the shark or the Circle surveillance) who is going to kill her soon. Like Mae, Eggers would seem to suggest, one’s personal data and digital privacy increasingly reside in the hands of sharks that have the power to destroy one’s privacy by utilizing one’s data for their benefit. But like the shark, these strategies of self-surveillance remain invisible to many users.

Some may argue that there are privacy laws and the companies cannot use our data without our knowledge, but The Cambridge Analytica and Facebook scandal, for example, reveals how our data can be misused. As I argue before, resistance against such misuse is possible but Egger’s novel reminds readers that social media companies may be tempted by totalitarian impulses that destroy all opposition. This failure of resistance could also be reflected from the perspective of Foucault’s idea of power as relational. As almost all of the users of the social media technology developed by Circle have been rewarded for their compliance and are routinely encouraged to act in ways that fulfill the social ideals associated with broadcasting one’s life and making oneself subject to the normalizing desires of the masses, it is therefore impossible – or very difficult – for a few revolutionary thinkers to change the system and especially to change the minds of users. But what may be most surprising about the narrative that Eggers offers regarding the emergence of pervasive data-based surveillance is that this may no longer be a tactic in order to promote particular social ideals and norms. Instead, it may become the end of surveillance in itself. In such a world, there can be no privacy; everyone will exist as fully public, transparent to the point of almost non-existence, as if one were only what social norms and ideals could imagine about existence and its complexities.

### Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Dr. George C. Grinnell, who provided me with timely feedback on my article.

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ISSN 1097-3087

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