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HUM 2020.01

December 6, 2020

The Public Panopticon in Dave Eggers *The Circle*

In the novel *The Circle*, the author views technology in two ways, for the betterment of society, shared by many of the “circlers” and as an extreme violation of privacy, a belief held by those that are not a part of the Circle. On one hand, technology is an extremely useful and sometimes necessary tool, it has made lives easier and facilitated new kinds of research and problem solving that could not have been solved before. While on the other hand the constant and rapid development of technology could lead to serious repercussions in the future. The belief that technology can do no harm is heavily illustrated in the beginning of the novel with the main characters introduction to working at the Circle. The second, more sinister view of technology, being that if the path of development is held by a small portion of the population, they will get to decide what should be done and how, is slowly introduced as the plot of the novel progresses, leaving those who do not wish to partake in the Circles services stranded. *The Circle* bears a striking resemblance to the novel *1984* by George Orwell. While not focused primarily on the development of technology, *1984* analyzes issues with personal privacy when one entity maintains control over a population. The basis of *1984* is that an oppressive government controls its civilian population through propaganda and surveillance. This government was brought to power through force after a global war and watches the population for instances of resistance to the government’s teachings. *The Circle* takes a much different approach to how the entity in question controls the population, by making themselves indispensable. In *1984* the population is constantly realizing that the government is controlling them against their will, but The Circle was put in place by the population and always has the support of the masses. *The Circle* shows the benefits and dangers of tech companies monopolizing their industries and the dangers of surveillance culture to personal privacy.

“Surveillance is neither new nor intrinsically oppressive.” (Stoddart) There are many types of surveillance with varying degrees of intensity ranging from government censuses to full blown panopticism. With the development of computing technology, we are in a new age of surveillance, referred to as ‘dataveillance’ by Stoddart where the capture and processing of data happens at increasing speeds, quantities and complexities. This is displayed multiple times throughout *The Circle* where Mai is constantly required to answer product questions to the development of SeeChange cameras and finally her ‘transparency’ where she live streams her life. While Mai thoroughly enjoys sharing her experiences, the more that she is forced to share the more she finds herself hiding her conversations and keeping secrets despite herself saying “secrets are lies” (Eggers)

“Surveillance culture is a product of contemporary late-modern conditions or, simply, of digital modernity.’ (Lyon) Today, surveillance is an unprecedented part of our society with people actively trying to monitor their own surveillance and the surveillance of others leading to a type of ‘surveillance culture’ as defined by Lyon, where people are ok with and often seek out surveillance. This is aided by the development of computing, the first being the mainframe with one central computer that everyone accesses to personal computing where individuals have their own computers such as smart phones and finally the embedding of computational devices in every day items, defined as the Internet of Things. After 9/11 governments partnered with technology companies to create an industry of “homeland security” for the purpose of security. “Such securitization demands greater amounts of information about risk and how to handle it, which both weakens traditional privacy requirements and increases surveillance of what are deemed risky behaviors. In terms of surveillance culture, this reinforces the sense that surveillance is warranted, "for our own good." In practice, of course, this is also understood ambivalently.” (Lyon)

Undeniably, the prevention of mass murder or terrorist attacks is a good reason for surveillance but what happens when it goes to far? Belarus, notoriously referred to as “the last dictatorship in Europe” has some interesting stories of the nation’s methods of surveillance. “These rumors paradoxically originate from the state’s attempt to preserve the country’s safety and stability by obscuring information about its defensive mechanism—surveillance.” (Astapova) Residents of Belarus believe that they are living in a panoptic society controlled by the government. A panopticon is a type of building designed by Samuel Bentham meant to watch many people with as little management as possible, with specific application to prisons, workhouses, hospitals, schools and many others. (Bentham) The government of Belarus is omnipresent in private life through direct surveillance and punishment, as well as the domination of the state in bureaucracy, distribution and employment. (Astapova) Similar scenarios can be seen in *The Circle* where the company controls almost all methods of advertising, data collection, and innovation rights. Those, mainly government employees, that speak out against the Circle are exposed as criminals as seen in this passage: “there was a wonderful thing that tended to happen, something that felt like poetic justice; every time someone started shouting about the supposed monopoly of the Circle, or the Circle’s unfair monetization of the personal data of its users, or some other paranoid and demonstrably false claim, soon enough it was revealed that that person was a criminal or deviant of the highest order.” (Eggers) It seems very coincidental that all of the Circles enemies would be extreme criminals and those at the Circle justify these coincidences by believing so heavily in the company that it could do no wrong.

The actions of the Circle seem to fit a dystopian narrative, but from Mai’s perspective “It’s heaven.” Eggers does a very good job of displaying the actions of the Circle, as unethical as they may be, with a light of positivity, focusing solely on the benefits of the technology. The majority of the public goes along and often encourages the developments of the Circle despite quickly losing the freedom of privacy. With the Circle and thus the “circlers” holding a superior place in society, many people are willing to conform to their beliefs. “People clamor to join the crowd and so are constantly “counting and counting” their level of popular approval, using these statistics to guide and direct their decision-making rather than making passionate, decisive ethical decisions of one’s own.” (Weissman) Many times throughout the novel, Mai is questioned about he meal choices, should there be more veggie options, make the food healthier, and choosing healthy alternatives because she is being monitored by her viewers. Even though the people watching are not directly involved in the decision, Mai feels that she would be letting down her followers if she did not choose the option that would be ‘better for everyone’ even though she eats healthy enough already.

This brings us back to panopticism, and the psychological effects of constantly being monitored. Bentham states that “the more constantly the persons to be inspected are under the eyes of the persons who should inspect them, the more perfectly will the purpose of the establishment have been attained.” (Bentham) In *The Circle* the goal of panopticism is to hold each person accountable for their actions, with everything being recorded and the ‘threat’ of someone always watching you, you are more likely to behave as you should. Weissman states that “the collective power of the public, through the aid of the media, can be brought down upon ordinary individuals in order to assure conformity with social conventions.” (Weissman) Mai’s longtime friend Mercer is a victim of just this scenario, wishing to remain apart from the Circles influence, he moves North and into the woods for privacy. Mai employs the public through a new service called SoulSearch to find her friend. Scared Mercer drives at high speeds to escape the cameras but drones follow him down the highway. Mercer realizes that he has no place to hide in society and instead of assimilating to the technology Mercer decides to drive off a cliff and take his own life. Afterwards one of the owners talks to Mai about how if Mercer had been driving an autonomous car this never would have happened, continuing to push for the development of technology despite the blatant message that Mercer was trying to send.

Eggers portrays the Circle as a utopian society on the surface, but as the plot progresses more aspects of dystopia begin to show. The Circle focuses solely on the benefits of technology and develops tools at breakneck speeds with no regard to societal issues that would arise from their developments. Using these tools, the Circle establishes a surveillance culture focusing on the accumulation of personal data for monetization or dataveillance. The privacy issues that occur from these developments in the novel serve to reset Mai’s moral compass but eventually these get overruled by her addiction to social media and more importantly, her performance metrics. Eggers uses *The Circle* as a prediction of the dangers of large internet tech companies and societies willingness to conform. While the benefits of these companies are numerous, the drawbacks could be disastrous.

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