

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 1

Month: December

Year: 2023

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Received: 18.10.2023

Accepted: 05.12.2023

Published: 14.12.2023

Citation:

Sathish Kumar, C.
“Unmasking Dave
Eggers’ the Circle: Power
and Deception in the
Modern Tech World.”
*Shanlax International
Journal of English*,
vol. 12, no. S1, 2023,
pp. 36–42.

DOI:

[https://doi.org/10.34293/
rtdh.v12iS1-Dec.55](https://doi.org/10.34293/rtdh.v12iS1-Dec.55)

Unmasking Dave Eggers’ *The Circle*: Power and Deception in the Modern Tech World

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Abstract

In this academic exploration, this research paper delves into the role and repercussions of simulation within the dystopian narrative of Dave Eggers’ “The Circle.” It accentuates the characters’ susceptibility to being beguiled by fabricated realities, leading to a skewed perception of their immediate surroundings. The conceptual foundation of this inquiry draws from the philosophical framework of Simulacra and Simulation developed by the renowned French sociologist and cultural theorist, Jean Baudrillard. This framework furnishes a lens through which to comprehend how technology can engender simulated realms that deviate from the tangible, corporeal world. Through a meticulous analysis of the aforementioned novel, this research elucidates how the corporation’s technological innovations give rise to a seemingly idealized universe that ultimately cloaks a deceptive nature. It scrutinizes the implications of this deception on the characters’ conception of self-identity and self-worth as they find themselves ensnared within a simulation that gradually erodes their individuality and autonomy. Furthermore, this study unearths Dave Eggers’ strategic deployment of simulated social media networking as a vehicle to critique the perils of surveillance capitalism and the deceptive veneer of complete transparency in the contemporary world, which has forfeited its genuineness and uniqueness in its relentless pursuit of acknowledgment and validation of human existence.

Keywords: Simulation, Dupery, Technology, Openness, Delusion, Singularity.

The novel “The Circle” by Dave Eggers presents an apocalyptic narrative that scrutinizes the potential hazards introduced by electronic devices and online networks in an era marked by escalating surveillance and control. The plot revolves around a twenty-four-year-old protagonist, Maebelline Renner Holland, who secures her coveted position at the influential tech corporation, The Circle. The firm initially seems idyllic to her during her inaugural visit, fostering an almost heavenly allure.

Mae, the central character, is depicted as a guileless and idealistic young woman who harbors an eagerness to contribute positively to her family and society through her association with The Circle. Her initial experiences within the corporate environment are overwhelming, with the demands of her role being particularly demanding. Nevertheless, her determination drives her to persevere, striving to distinguish herself. In her view, everything beyond The Circle’s confines appears to be mired in chaos, disillusionment, and squalor. Mae comes to the realization that no other place could

compare to *The Circle*, and she remains unwavering in her commitment to it.

As Mae becomes increasingly immersed in *The Circle*'s realm, her life undergoes a transformation. She forges deeper bonds with her colleagues, her self-assurance grows, and she adopts a more open and transparent demeanor. However, as the narrative unfolds, readers are confronted with the sobering truth about the company's vision for a completely transparent and interconnected world. This vision leaves no room for individuality or authenticity, ultimately exacting a heavy toll on those ensnared within its confines.

In his precise and straightforward narrative style, Dave Eggers envisions a dystopian future characterized by ubiquitous surveillance, where every individual is relentlessly monitored from birth to death, with no avenue for escape. This totalitarian vision obliterates the fundamental right to personal privacy, perpetually surveilling the activities of individuals across the globe, all for the purpose of capitalizing on this wealth of information. Eggers artfully crafts the narrative to elicit a natural yet deeply disconcerting response from the reader, effectively igniting a discourse on the unchecked influence of 'social media gone awry' and the relentless pursuit of online validation in the contemporary world. His work is both persuasive and disquieting.

Notably, Eggers employs a satirical narrative technique when designating the locations within the corporate entity, drawing inspiration from historically significant locales. He similarly satirizes the various simulation models offered by the corporation, such as TruYou, Past Perfect, Soul Search, See Change, and others. The founders of this corporate juggernaut are wryly referred to as the "Three Wise Men," individuals with grandiose aspirations of global dominion through their corporate enterprise, as symbolized by their ambitious declaration, "We will become all-seeing, all-knowing."

Eggers astutely populates his narrative with characters who serve as conduits for comprehending the dichotomous worlds he explores. One of these worlds is the realm of simulated reality, inhabited by figures like the aforementioned Two Wise Men, Eamon Bailey and Tom Stenton, along with Mae and her fellow participants in *The Circle*. The other world comprises individuals who staunchly resist participation in this seemingly flawless yet intrusively surveilled existence, a world that infringes upon their fundamental human right to privacy. Among these dissenters are Mercer, Mae's parents, and Tyler Alexander Gospodinov, the enigmatic founder of the corporate behemoth. This dual narrative thread underscores the central tension and thematic depth of Eggers' work.

"*The Circle*" is often likened to contemporary dystopian literary works, such as George Orwell's "1984" and Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World." In the assessment of Ron Charles, as articulated in the *Washington Post*, "*The Circle*" is akin to "Brave New World" tailored for our contemporary era, characterized by its rapid pace, clever wit, and disquieting themes. Within his narrative, Dave Eggers delves into a future where conformity emerges as the prevailing norm, and individuality steadily erodes as people strive to align themselves with the benchmarks prescribed by an artificial reality forged through social media. He articulates a world where maxims such as 'Secrets are lies, Sharing is Caring, and Privacy is theft' (303) hold sway. While these declarations may initially appear enticing, closer scrutiny reveals that our habitual practice of incessantly sharing every aspect of our lives on social media platforms, in pursuit of acknowledgment and validation, has the unintended consequence of transforming us into socially detached beings. We derive a sense of fulfillment from quantifying ourselves based on the quantity of likes, comments, and followers we amass on these platforms.

Furthermore, these maxims bear an uncanny resemblance to the principles espoused in George Orwell's "1984," where Orwell declares that 'War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength.' These two literary works collectively embody nightmarish visions of a totalitarian reality that could transpire if governmental or institutional authorities were to wield absolute dominion

(Orwell). Orwell expounds on the concept of Thought Police, Oceania's covert enforcement agency tasked with investigating and quelling thought crime, i.e., private and political convictions unapproved by Ingsoc's ruling authority. Conversely, Dave Eggers illuminates the prevalence of Change cameras, discreetly stationed throughout the world, camouflaged to appear as inconspicuous vegetation or nondescript objects, evading notice by the average observer (63).

Surveillance plays a pervasive and all-encompassing role in both literary works. In these narratives, every facet of individuals' lives, encompassing their conversations, actions, and even their innermost thoughts, falls under the watchful gaze of either the government or *The Circle*. Another noteworthy examination in "*The Circle*" pertains to the theme of surveillance in contemporary culture. Throughout the text, *The Circle* deploys an array of cutting-edge technologies designed for global monitoring.

While *The Circle*'s surveillance network extends its purview across the technologically advanced world, its proponents, particularly exemplified by Eamon Bailey, espouse the belief that surveillance is a beneficial endeavor. They contend that willingly subjecting oneself to constant observation ultimately leads to a state of enlightenment. Bailey expresses this viewpoint, stating, "I genuinely believe that if our sole path is the right and best path, it would offer the ultimate and comprehensive solace. There would be no temptation by the shadows any longer" (291). Bailey's advocacy of transparency eerily echoes the old totalitarian axiom, "If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear." In stark contrast to Bailey's ideals, "*The Circle*" illustrates the intricate dynamics of surveillance and the cultivation of a culture rooted in transparency.

Social Media as a Simulated Reality: A Critical Analysis

According to a widely accepted definition, social media can be described as a digital technology that facilitates the exchange of textual content and multimedia within virtual networks and online communities. Originally designed to bridge geographical distances, obliterate boundaries, and foster global connections, the question arises as to whether it still effectively fulfills these objectives. In contemporary times, social media has evolved into a realm where individuals cultivate multiple online personas, often grappling with illusions rather than dissolving barriers. It has become a realm replete with meticulously curated images, concealing inner anxieties and distorted self-images behind carefully filtered social media profiles that bear little resemblance to reality.

As Jean Baudrillard astutely noted, "Melancholic and fascinated—such is our general disposition in an era of involuntary transparency." This observation stems from our familiarity with perceiving individuals primarily through their filtered online identities. Such exposure leads to the oversight of the fact that our seemingly flawless social media profiles and filtered images are but fragments of our multifaceted selves. They should not be mistaken for our complete identities. As Baudrillard articulated, "It is exceedingly challenging to capture individuals or their countenances photographically. The difficulty lies in the fact that psychological focus often eludes the photographer's lens. Human beings represent intricate *mise-en-scène* sites, characterized by profound (de) construction, making it nearly impossible to isolate them from the meaning they carry and uncover the concealed essence of their absence."

One of the central drawbacks of social media is the tendency for individuals to tie their self-worth to the validation they receive in these digital platforms. Research indicates that the more time one invests in these social media applications, the higher the likelihood of succumbing to the snares of anxiety and depression. Social media perpetuates the pursuit of perfection and idealism, making it exceedingly easy for people to fall into the trap of making unfavorable comparisons. These comparative evaluations, often juxtaposed with others, can instill self-doubt, ultimately contributing to mental health disorders. Such is the predicament faced by Mae Holland, the protagonist in the

novel under scrutiny, whose entire sense of identity and self-worth hinges upon the content she presents to her online audience, measured in the form of everyday data.

Surveillance Capitalism in the Realm of Social Media: A Comprehensive Examination

The undeniable reality is that social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have been avidly gathering our personal data. Every tap and like on these platforms directs progressively tailored content onto our screens. These social media channels are central to the inception and proliferation of a novel form of the capitalist system: surveillance capitalism. Within the framework of surveillance capitalism, these platforms offer “cost-free” services in exchange for the meticulous tracking of customers’ behavioral patterns.

While some of this data serves to enhance service quality, the overwhelming majority is harnessed for the creation of advertising content, referred to by Shoshana Zuboff as “prediction products.” Marketers utilize this trove of information to foresee consumer behavior and expenditure trends in the future. Consequently, profit sharing is no longer extended to consumers; instead, they themselves are packaged and sold. “The Circle,” a compelling novel, unearths the detrimental consequences of surveillance capitalism. It paints a vivid portrait of a society in which privacy is systematically eroded, personal boundaries are ceaselessly transgressed, and individuals find themselves perpetually under scrutiny. As Mercer, the protagonist’s former boyfriend, astutely remarks, “I’ve never felt more that there is some cult taking over the world.” The characters within the narrative grapple with the stifling grip of conformity, the erosion of personal agency, and the looming specter of power abuse at the hands of The Circle and its personnel.

Echoing the sentiments of the French sociologist and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard, “We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning.” Many of The Circle’s characters appear preoccupied with the ceaseless collection and dissemination of information, often without delving into its deeper significance or meaning. This observation serves as a commentary on our contemporary culture of social media and incessant online sharing, where individuals habitually consume and produce copious amounts of data but may not pause to ponder its true significance or deeper meaning. The novel posits that the relentless pursuit of an ostensibly perfect and interconnected world may paradoxically lead to a dearth of meaning and purpose in life. The characters, ensnared in a self-imposed simulation, find themselves unable to escape the relentless pressure to maintain constant online connectivity and validation, driven by the company’s slogan, “Knowing is good, but knowing everything is better.”

This unrelenting compulsion to share and meticulously curate every facet of one’s life results in the erosion of privacy and a distortion of self. In line with the insights of the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, “There are dangers associated with the utilization of hyperreality within our culture. Individuals may perceive and embrace hyperreal images as role models, even when these images fail to represent authentic physical individuals. This can lead to an aspiration for an unattainable ideal or foster a dearth of unadulterated role models.” Similarly, Mae Holland, the novel’s protagonist, becomes increasingly fixated on her online persona, dedicating more and more time to virtual interactions and less to genuine human connections. Her engagement with family and friends wanes, and she even begins to question her own thoughts and emotions, as they deviate from the “norms” set by The Circle’s online community.

Mercer’s Discourse on Modern Technology and Its Social Implications

Dave Eggers employs the character Mercer as a prominent voice delivering a thought-provoking discourse that serves as a revelation for readers. Through Mercer, Eggers highlights the dystopian aspects of technology, which, while connecting people across the globe, has distanced them from those who genuinely care about them. Recent data from a New York-based agency indicates that the

average internet user aged 16 to 64 spends approximately seven hours online each day. Alarming statistics reveal that roughly three out of ten United States citizens admit to being virtually always online, coining the term ‘chronically online’ as described by the Urban Dictionary. This label is attributed to individuals whose entire existence revolves around their mobile devices, and they lack a real-life presence beyond their social media profiles, creating a facade of a life that scarcely exists in reality.

Jean Baudrillard’s seminal work, “Simulations,” emphasizes how reality no longer even takes on the appearance of reality, surpassing fiction. Postmodernism underscores the blurring of the boundaries between reality and fiction, a phenomenon that social media platforms wholeheartedly support. Naval Ravikant, the Indian American entrepreneur, aptly points out one of the most detrimental consequences of social media. It transforms all of its users into pseudo-celebrities, a phenomenon that ironically contributes to immense personal misery. These self-proclaimed celebrities base their self-image predominantly on the compliments they receive from their online following, a self-esteem more fragile than it appears. Even a single insult has the potential to shatter their entire self-image.

In Mercer’s perspective, modern individuals are left with nothing but a set of numerical metrics that encapsulate their worth. This mirrors the current culture of celebrity, where people become obsessed with the numbers of likes, comments, shares, and subscribers on their social media platforms. What began as a means of fostering connections has since evolved into a pervasive mechanism designed to addict users, preventing them from escaping its allure. The experience of aimless scrolling on social media platforms, hours slipping away unnoticed, often leaves individuals feeling miserable and drained. Renowned neuroscientist Andrew Huberman likens this behavior to a dog continuously digging the ground, ceaselessly seeking an elusive bone. He notes that if humans were observed as experimental subjects acting in this manner, the conclusion would be that they appear unwell, persistently searching in the same spot with the anticipation of finding something. This addiction to mindless scrolling has become an overarching characteristic of modern life.

The algorithms that underpin social media platforms employ powerful strategies to keep users engaged and performing specific behaviors that ultimately benefit these companies. Baudrillard’s assertion, “You no longer watch TV, it is TV that watches you (live),” underscores the shift from a panoptic surveillance mechanism to a system of deterrence, where the distinction between passive consumption and active participation becomes blurred. In essence, the user becomes both the model and the majority. This concept directly translates to our use of mobile phones, where the screens themselves observe and engage with users. They have given rise to tech giants who profit by harvesting our private information, encompassing our text messages, emails, search histories, content preferences, shared material, and even health data gleaned from applications such as Google Fit. The pervasive surveillance of our lives by these devices underscores the complex interplay between modern technology, corporate interests, and the erosion of privacy.

The adage holds true that in the online realm, if you’re not paying for the services, you become the commodity, subject to being traded and sold. This reality unfolds dramatically in the life of the protagonist, Mae, who initially found herself entranced by the allure of free accommodations, sumptuous meals, events, and even free health insurance for her ailing father afflicted by multiple sclerosis. However, unbeknownst to her, there was a concealed cost to these apparent luxuries—her family’s privacy was sacrificed with the installation of See Change cameras in their home. These cameras discreetly documented and saved every facet of their lives in the cloud.

Dave Eggers ingeniously crafts this narrative to underscore the illusory veneer of transparency that characterizes the present era. The insidious compulsion to share every detail of life online has wrought disastrous consequences across the globe. Mae’s transformation, from someone who lacked the time to read all the congratulatory messages for her initial success to an individual

consumed by an all-encompassing pursuit of amassing social media rank, speaks volumes. The narrative illuminates the ubiquitous social media trap that ensnares individuals, compelling them to partake in a relentless competition devoid of genuine substance. The quest to outshine others is fueled by the allure of imaginary rewards, such as the acquisition of social media metrics that lack intrinsic value. Mae's restless nights, consumed by anxiety about her standing in the company's participation rank, epitomize the pervasive nature of this phenomenon.

Social media has conditioned individuals, akin to Skinner's pigeons, who seek validation from others, often without acknowledgment in return. This dynamic pervades the novel, exemplified when only three percent of "Circlers" vote negatively in the Demoxie voting session on Mae's awesomeness. Despite the overwhelming majority finding her exceptional or, at the very least, voting favorably, her fixation remains on the three percent who do not. She meticulously calculates the number of Circlers and thus, the approximate 368 individuals who harbor a negative sentiment toward her. The obsession with these dissenting voices sows the seeds of her emotional turmoil.

Mae's emotional well-being suffers considerably as she is profoundly affected by this minority's rejection. She spirals into a realm of deep distress, assuming the worst, personifying anonymous frowns as desires for her demise. Her psyche equates these seemingly innocuous online expressions of disapproval with murderous intent, envisioning the 368 individuals as harboring an extreme animosity, wishing she had never been born. This episode mirrors Naval Ravikant's assertion that self-image, predicated on external validation, is profoundly fragile, easily shattered by minor slights or disrespect perceived as threats to one's identity.

Social media has conditioned individuals to perceive likes and dislikes as a form of reward or positive reinforcement. The incessant use of image filters and editing for likability and acceptance has transformed individuality into conformity to unrealistic social media standards. The digital age has prompted a collective endeavor to imbue meaning into every aspect of existence, leading to a saturation of meaning that paradoxically results in an emptiness. Josiah, Mae's colleague, reflects this perspective when he laments that information, mistakenly considered knowledge, faces the risk of disintegration due to the ephemeral nature of the digital world.

Mae herself perpetuates the confusion between information and knowledge, exclaiming that "We all collectively own the accumulated knowledge of the world." The popular slogan "Privacy is theft" reinforces the agenda propagated by The Circle and social media at large. Dave Eggers strategically employs this phrase to underscore the overarching message of the story—where the pursuit of information in the name of transparency threatens privacy and individuality. Mae's harrowing journey within the domain of social media poignantly portrays the societal ramifications of a world obsessed with sharing, likes, and conformity to online standards. The quest for validation, the fragility of self-image, and the loss of individuality are powerful themes that resonate in a digital age where the boundaries between the real and the digital continue to blur.

A Wake-Up Call for a Hyper-connected Society

Dave Eggers, through this thought-provoking novel, forewarns us of a dystopian future that looms ominously, unless we critically assess the social media applications that increasingly ensnare us, preventing us from engaging with the tangible world. It is imperative that we peel our eyes from our ceaseless scrolling on our cell phone screens, cease the pursuit of fleeting connections with strangers online, and instead invest time with our parents and friends who harbor genuine care for our well-being. Our online persona, portrayed through our social media profiles, is a mere simulacrum, a shadow of our true selves. The protagonist, Mae, astutely points out that this matrix of online preferences can never truly encapsulate the entirety of an individual.

Eggers unearths the depths of human behavior, unveiling our capability for negativity. The age-

old adage that every individual possesses a dark side holds true. To avoid falling into the abyss of chaos and disorder, we must approach social media with a lighthearted disposition. The architects of social media platforms designed these applications primarily for amusement, and thus, we ought to regard them as such, rather than attaching our emotional well-being to the numbers of likes, comments, or other external affirmations we accrue. Mae's journey is emblematic of the pitfalls of low self-esteem. She incessantly chases external validation and power, inadvertently neglecting the fundamental truth that no amount of external validation can mend the void in one's heart unless they cultivate self-worth. The cult of celebrity that thrives on social media pushes us to construct contrived, idealized versions of our lives online, starkly divergent from our actual reality. It is high time we break free from this simulation and immerse ourselves in the genuine world.

As Baudrillard aptly characterizes the current generation, we are both melancholic and fascinated, caught in the throes of social media's ceaseless expectations. The insidious fear of missing out perpetuates the belief that social abandonment is imminent if one fails to stay updated on the latest online news. In the tangible world, these concerns hold no sway. Differentiating between reality and the virtual world is a skill we must develop. Our ceaseless quest for information about others and their recent activities online begets the pernicious cycle of comparison. We must come to terms with the fact that social media life is an illusion, where everyone appears flawless. Mercer's tragic death, spurred by Mae's relentless pursuit of technological dominance, is perceived as his fault. Her parents, seeking refuge from a world bereft of privacy, flee their original abode. Yet Mae remains undeterred, yearning for the completion of the Circle, the very entity responsible for her friend's demise and her parents' exodus.

This research lays bare the perils of technology and how social media applications create a relentless world with no time for reprieve, introspection, or relaxation. It is a clarion call to future generations to resist this cultural straitjacket and free themselves from these digital constraints. It is an appeal to embrace authentic connections and the tangible world over the allure of an idealized existence projected on social media. The choice lies with us to break free from these virtual shackles and rediscover the beauty of reality.

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