

Chapman University

## Chapman University Digital Commons

---

English (MA) Theses

Dissertations and Theses

---

Spring 5-2021

### Surveillance: The Digital Dark Side

Brittyn Davis

Chapman University, [brittdavis@chapman.edu](mailto:brittdavis@chapman.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/english\\_theses](https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/english_theses)



Part of the [Modern Literature Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Davis, Brittyn R.. *Surveillance: The Digital Dark Side*. 2021. Chapman University, MA Thesis. *Chapman University Digital Commons*, <https://doi.org/10.36837/chapman.000277>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations and Theses at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English (MA) Theses by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [laughtin@chapman.edu](mailto:laughtin@chapman.edu).

Surveillance: The Digital Dark Side

A Thesis by

Brittyn R. Davis

Chapman University

Orange, CA

Wilkinson College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

May 2021

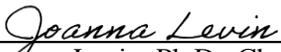
Committee in charge:

Joanna Levin, Ph.D., Chair

Ian Barnard, Ph.D.

Justine Van Meter, Ph.D.

The thesis of Brittyn R. Davis is approved.

  
Joanna Levin, Ph.D., Chair

  
Ian Barnard, Ph.D.

  
Justine Van Meter, Ph.D.

May 2021

Surveillance: The Digital Dark Side

Copyright © 2021  
by Brittyn R. Davis

# ABSTRACT

Surveillance: The Digital Dark Side

by Brittyn R. Davis

The aim of this thesis is to take a closer look at Jeremy Bentham's eighteenth century prison, the Panopticon, in order to address how its structural makeup was not only intended to effectively surveil prisoners, but also how this very early model of surveillance has developed over time and has found its way into the digital sphere of our world. By closely examining Dave Eggers' novel *The Circle*, specifically by tracing the character arc of the main character Mae, this dystopian novel will track how Mae's evolving relationship with the digital sphere is much like society's newfound relationship with digital surveillance models, such as our phones and social media. In part, these now interactive surveillance mechanisms are not only altering how Mae and society's users interact with others, but the digital content that we view plays a part in shaping our online and personal identity as well. As Margaret Atwood states best in her review of *The Circle*, "When Privacy is Theft":

Publication on social media is in part a performance, as is everything "social" that human beings do; but what happens when that brightly lit arena expands so much that there is no green room in which the mascara can be removed, no cluttered, imperfect back stage where we can be "ourselves"? What happens to us if we must be "on" all the time? Then we're in the twenty-four-hour glare of the supervised prison. To live entirely in public is a form of solitary confinement. (Atwood 1)<sup>1</sup>

When characters like Mae and real life users are being conditioned by technology to think and act a certain way, the human aspect, in all its nuance and complexity, is in danger of being lost

---

<sup>1</sup> Atwood, Margaret. "When Privacy is Theft". The New York Review. New York, NY. 21 November 2013.

and the individual becomes trapped in a digital prison, always having to be on their best behavior, unsure as to whether they are being surveilled. Finally, with the support from Eggers' novel and various outside sources, I will work to prove that this weapon that we call technology harms more than it hurts, and though it has valuable resources to offer, we must be conscious of its impending dark side.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>IV</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Early Thoughts on Digital Surveillance.....	1
<b>2 PANOPTICON.....</b>	<b>2</b>
2.1 A Disciplinary Concept .....	2
<b>3 THE CIRCLE.....</b>	<b>6</b>
3.1 The Novel .....	6
3.2 Surveillance Models .....	8
3.3 The Hierarchy .....	11
3.4 Surveillance Progression.....	12
3.5 Technological Interaction .....	14
3.6 Online Identity .....	16
3.7 Not That Far Off .....	23
3.8 Pros and Cons of Surveillance.....	26
3.9 New Relationships with Surveillance .....	29
<b>4 CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>35</b>
4.1 Concluding Thoughts.....	35
<b>5 BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>37</b>

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Early Thoughts on Digital Surveillance

“Today’s children are growing up in the computer culture,” not only surrounded by digital tools for learning, but online social platforms that have transformed the way we interact with others (Turkle 77).<sup>2</sup> Along with the technological developments that our world is experiencing comes advancement in our surveillance mechanisms. Tracing back to Jeremy Bentham’s eighteenth century Panopticon prison model where surveillance had been planned to be used as a form of punishment, we can now see similar tactics at play with our 21<sup>st</sup> century technology. Specifically, this trajectory of progress is represented in Dave Eggers’ text *The Circle*. Following the main character, Mae, and her evolving obsession with technology, we can see how the panoptic structure’s surveillance hierarchy mirrors the digital hierarchy that has been created by interactive technology, and by looking at the new relationship that society and Mae have formed with technology, we can see that the digitally invasive world that Eggers creates in his novel is not all that far off from the surveilled world that we live in.

---

<sup>2</sup> Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York, NY. Touchstone, 1995.

# 2 Panopticon

## 2.1 A Disciplinary Concept

If we are to properly trace how surveillance models have evolved overtime, it is important to take a step back in time to one of the earliest systems where we see surveillance tactics being put into play. Looking at how the surveillance mechanisms that were embedded into Jeremy Bentham's eighteenth century prison model were meant to work, had the structure been built, we can see this as a mirroring of the intense surveillance levels founds in contemporary society. The Panopticon was a fictitious prison model designed with a layout that was meant to promote surveillance of the prisoners. As described by theorist Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish:*

Bentham's Panopticon is the architectural figure of this composition. We know the principle on which it was based: at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. (200)<sup>3</sup>

Within the Panopticon, the prisoner

is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication. The arrangement of his room, opposite the central tower, imposes on him an axial visibility; but the divisions of the ring, those separated cells, imply a lateral invisibility. (Foucault 200)

The “disciplinary partitioning,” as Foucault describes it, creates a sort of power dynamic

---

<sup>3</sup> Foucault, Michel, 1926-1984. *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.

(Foucault 199). “[Jeremy] Bentham presents it as a particular institution, closed in upon itself” (Bumas 133).<sup>4</sup>

In “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” DeLeuze notes, “The individual never ceases passing from one closed environment to another” (DeLeuze 1).<sup>5</sup> By strategically separating the prisoners into various levels and wings, by sex and severity of the committed crime, Bentham’s goal was to create a sort of hierarchy through which individuals could surveil each other, with the guards watching over the prisoners (Bentham 79).<sup>6</sup> As Foucault explains:

To begin with, this made it possible - as a negative effect – to avoid those compact, swarming, howling masses that were to be found in places of confinement, those painted by Goya or described by Howard. Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. (Foucault 200)

With the guards at the center of the prison, and with all the prisoners on the outskirts of this cylindrical model, the prisoners have no way of knowing whether they are or are not being surveilled.

Looking back at the history of the penal system, prisoners historically were reprimanded with physical punishment. As noted in Shaskan Bumas’ “Fictions of the Panopticon: Prison, Utopia, and the Out-Penitent in the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne,” the late eighteenth century text *The Prison Reform Movement* traces a path that moves away from “evil human behavior” through

---

<sup>4</sup> Bumas, E. Shaskan. “Fictions of the Panopticon: Prison, Utopia, and the Out Penitent in the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne.” *Project Muse*. Duke University Press, American Literature, Volume 73, Number 1, March 2001, pp. 121-145.

<sup>5</sup> DeLeuze, Gilles. “Postscript on the Societies of Control.” October, vol. 59, JSTOR, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Bentham, Jeremy. *Panopticon; or, The Inspection House*. London, Reprinted and sold by T. Payne, 1791, Volume 2.

physical violence and towards the “cleanse of the soul” through surveilled reform (Bumas 125). With Bentham’s Panopticon, punishment would be more geared towards mental control. By not being aware of when you are and are not being surveilled, prisoners are more likely to condition themselves to behave. In *Panopticon; or, The Inspection House*, Bentham explains that in this confinement, the prisoners, aware that they are being watched, might feel guilt for their committed crimes (Bentham 199). Whether or not their conditioned actions are driven by guilt, the constant surveilling is a sort of mental punishment that is the driving force of success for this model. Foucault traces this change in how power is exercised when he writes about Bentham’s belief that power should be both visible and unverifiable. He writes that,

Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so. In order to make the presence or absence of the inspector unverifiable, so that the prisoners, in their cells, cannot even see a shadow, Bentham envisaged not only Venetian blinds on the windows of the central observation hall, but, on the inside, partitions that intersected the hall at right angles and, in order to pass from one quarter to the other, not doors but zig-zag openings; for the slightest noise, a gleam of light, a brightness in a half-opened door would betray the presence of the guardian. (Foucault 200)

The main idea is to make it so the inmate is forced to be conscious that there is a possibility that they are always being watched, without actually knowing when it is in fact occurring (Foucault 201). This “architectural apparatus” allows the power dynamic to be sustained without certainty of the ongoing surveillance (Foucault 201). Therefore, this principle of power is not caused by constant human surveillance, but rather the variable of the unknown causes the prisoners to patrol themselves. “The more numerous those anonymous and temporary observers are, the greater the risk for the inmate of being surprised and the greater his anxious awareness of being observed” (Foucault 202). Foucault labels this method of punishment altogether as a “more subdued suffering” (Foucault 16).

Overall, this model of surveillance is the early workings of society's intensified desire to surveil individuals. We not only see this model in prisons, but in schools, hospitals, workplaces, and even with our own families (DeLeuze 4). As I will argue, surveillance mechanisms have continued to proliferate in social systems and we can see a dystopian perspective on digitized surveillance in Dave Eggers' novel *The Circle* (2013). This tactic of surveilling others not only intensifies our desire to behave, but as we will come to see with the novel, it can alter our way of thought as well. The novel exemplifies the "real subjection" that Foucault maintained derived from panoptic surveillance and the subject's internalization of the disciplinary gaze, demonstrating that "[he] who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault 203).

# 3 *The Circle*

## 3.1 The Novel

In Dave Eggers' novel *The Circle*, we come to meet Mae, the main character. At the beginning of the novel, readers follow Mae as she begins her life-changing journey at her new job at the Circle, a massively successful technology company, where she utilizes the company's online platform and works to drive the engagement not only of herself and her coworkers, but also of the users of this platform. Tracing Mae's personal and professional path in the novel, readers can see how Mae's intensified interaction with the platform, that doubles as a surveillance model, leads not only to her success (or downfall, depending on your perspective), but also the success (or downfall) of others around her.

With Mae's first day on site, she is in awe of the facility, blinded by its looks and the clout that the company has grown for itself. On Mae's first day, what is quickly exposed to her is how much the company's employees already know about Mae. Renata, Mae's first human interaction at the company, starts off by using retinal interface, and as Mae exclaims her love for Calder, a modern artist, Renata admits that she already knew this about Mae (4-5). Upon Mae's arrival at her cubicle, she discovers that it has been decorated with the same synthetic linen that adorned the cubicle from her previous job (7-8). Some individuals might be flattered by this gesture, but as Mae even admits, she is filled with slight horror (8). Is it creepy that they have this information prior to Mae's arrival, which reveals the intense levels of surveillance that their company and its workers participate in. As Mae comes to learn, this act was merely a joke, but still a joke that requires the extreme surveillance of an individual. Even when Mae goes kayaking

and gets arrested, her boss knows this information before she returns to work on Monday (275). Dan, her boss, knows that she has been visiting her parents, who have a friend that is anti-digital (276). Dan is watching her every move and is judging how it will impact the group image for the company, all the way down to her not wearing a life preserver while kayaking (278). Also crucial are speed proficiency levels, the efficiency with which workers like Mae respond to customer requests and questions. Dan is quick to remind Mae of the progress that she has made in the workplace, which to no surprise he has been surveilling (278-279). He uses this workplace progress as a guilt tactic to bring her back into the group mindset, so that she stays focused and so that she is scared into behaving in a way that is for the good of the group and the company. This method of conditioning is similar to that found in the Panopticon structure, and Mae, “subjected to a field of visibility,” begins to “assum[e] responsibility for the constraints of power” and “become[s] the principle of [her] own subjection” (Foucault 202-03). For Jeremy Bentham it is about the watching of individuals, but as Foucault expresses in his work *Discipline and Punish*, “The Panopticon is a marvelous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogeneous effects of power” (Foucault 202). The constraints of this power dynamic lead the prisoner to constantly be on alert for what is going on around them, all the while being observed. The unknown variable of when one is or is not being watched is what causes us to self-condition our actions. With the text *The Circle*, this becomes a paradoxical environment, because those working at the Circle have the ability to see all, all the while they too are being watched whether they like it or not (Gouck 58). They are not only the viewers using the Circle to surveil others, but the machine that they are operating is watching over them as well. As Gouck notes, “The Circle facilitates a voyeuristic mentality” because it is like seeing without being seen (Gouck 59). The circlers can in fact see each other, but it is the technological

aspect that is essentially God-like. It is the one thing that is supposedly always watching, listening, and recording but cannot be confirmed. This is because the workers know that they are being watched and recorded, but they do not have access to these recordings and do not have the power to know when this technology's surveillance mechanisms are on or off. This is similar to the Panopticon in the way that the prisoners know that there is a possibility that a guard is always watching them from the tower. It is this concept of the Circle presented in Eggers' text that brings this panoptic concept into the modern age (Gouck 58).

### **3.2 Surveillance Models**

As readers follow Mae's day-to-day work at the Circle, we are exposed to various surveillance mechanisms that the company participates in. Annie, a senior executive of the Circle, exposes Mae to the most simplistic form of surveillance. This would be the visible transparency found in the lunchroom and known as "The Glass Eatery" (15). The infrastructure was actually glass, all the way down to its floors (15). The company even has a "Borrow Room" where objects like bicycles, telescopes, and hang gliders can be borrowed for free (15). This does sound pretty cool, but it is important to remember that the usage of these items is being monitored as well. Annie even admits on this tour that she will personally be watching Mae, but puts a positive spin on it, admitting that it is for her benefit and potential growth in the company (16). On Mae's first day, she is also required to sign her name several times with no explanation, hand over her driver's license, provide her fingerprint, and transfer all of the information on her personal laptop and phone to a company tablet and phone (41-43). In a matter of minutes, she relinquishes her personal privacy. Her personal and professional lives mesh before her eyes, and to make matters worse, her content is also backed up to the cloud and on the company's server (43). The individuals that assist with this process make it sound so effortless and convenient, the same way

they do when you go to the Apple Store, but with this ease, comes total transparency. The interior world of Mae, her world of privacy, is slowly being destroyed.

As Mae starts to dive into her job, she finds herself messaging, commenting, and responding to posts all day long. Her job is labeled as Customer Experience, but she really ends up being more of a social media engager. Mae becomes judged by her speed proficiency when it comes to responding to customer requests. It is not about the depth of the engagement, but rather the speed at which she could engage, and how many total engagements she could have in a day. Every time Mae answers a customer request, they are surveyed on their experience and can rate their experience with Mae. For example, with Mae's first go at responding to customer requests, she is rated a 99 percent by the customer (51). This rating jars Jared, Mae's supervisor in Customer Experience, because at her workplace, it is all about ratings. Along with engaging with others, her peers watch her work and are commenting and liking her engagements as well. She is scored like a competition, and though this seems degrading from an outside perspective, from the inside, all the comments and likes from Mae's coworkers begin to act like a sort of affirmation of her work. The quicker she works, the more response her coworkers give her, and the more she is mentioned on the Zing, which seems like a meshing of our Twitter and Yelp (54). The Circle includes social media capabilities such as posting, liking, and sharing that can be done on Twitter. Then the Zing allows for reviews and likes of those reviews, which is very much like Yelp. Also similar to Yelp, workers begin to forward Mae the messages when she is mentioned on Zing (54).

Much like Bentham's Panopticon, the Circle has a way of surveilling its employees. Though the Panopticon is meant to surveil prisoners, the characters of this novel become sort of digital prisoners. It starts with the job and then, for Mae, her coworkers begin to nag her about her teeth

and let her know that the company has a great dental plan (56). The employees that have been there for an extended period of time are so brainwashed by the company's work and goals, that they too are helping to sway new employees to better fit the mold of the Circle. The longer Mae works for the company, the higher the expectation level is of her time spent engaging. It starts on the clock, then on her breaks, and then progresses to her being expected to engage with the company's platform off the clock as well (95). Gina, an employee at the Circle who sets Mae up with her various social networking accounts, is quick to remind Mae that she is expected to use these accounts to participate as "an act of the *community*," "as an act of *reaching out*," and because this is a "company that exists because of the social media that you consider '*extracurricular*'" (95). The Circle's workers try to make this level of engagement appear positive, and Mae quickly falls into this trap.

When Mae is kayaking, even then she is still hooked. She cannot even enjoy nature for a few moments without checking her phone (139). She checks her phone so often that when she is asked the time by the gentleman that runs the kayak company, she already knows it without having to look at her phone (139). On Mae's first day, one gentleman, Brandon, compares losing material on a hard drive to his house burning down, as if the two are comparable (44). By staying attached to one's phone, the novel suggests that you will begin to be run by your phone. All points of communication can be found there, your flights, your money, and even the time. The level of interaction that we have with our phones is so intense that we are now having feelings in reaction to messages that are sent to us. For Mae, this includes excitement over emails and even junk mail (134). When Mercer, her parent's friend, tries to shake her straight, she thinks he is crazy. He warns, "It's like snack food. You know how they engineer this food? They scientifically determine precisely how much salt and fat they need to include to keep you eating.

You're not hungry, you don't need the food, it does nothing for you, but you keep eating these empty calories" (134). Mercer echoes contemporaneous social media critics who argue that the stimulation and satisfaction that we receive from social media is little to none, and yet, we stay hooked. We stay attached to the device that is extracting information out of us because it is providing us with intermittent positive reinforcement, a dopamine hit, every time we hit refresh (Orlowski 00:28:59-00:29:14). Like Mae, we have been conditioned to think that "TO HEAL WE MUST KNOW. TO KNOW WE MUST SHARE" (151).

### **3.3 The Hierarchy**

As the novel charges forward, Mae's company continues to celebrate the concept of being hooked. There is even a "message hierarchy" put into place to entice workers to stay attached to the Circle's platform (99). Gina explains the hierarchy to Mae when she says,

"Okay, so you know that your first-screen CE responsibilities are paramount. We have to serve our customers with our full attention and our full hearts, So that's understood.

On your second screen, you might get messages from Dan and Jared, or Annie, or anyone directly supervising your work. Those messages inform the minute-to-minute quality of your service. So that would be your second priority.

The third screen is your social, Inner-and OuterCircle. But these messages aren't, like superfluous. They're just as important as any other messages, but they are prioritized third. And sometimes they're urgent. Keep any eye on the InnerCircle feed in particular, because that's where you'll hear about staff meetings, mandatory gatherings, and any breaking news. If there's a Circle notice that's really pressing, that'll be marked in orange. Something extremely urgent will prompt a message on your phone, too.

So those are the priorities, with your fourth priority your own OuterCircle participation. Which is just as important as anything else, because we value your work-life balance, you know, the calibration between your online life here at the company and outside it. I hope that's clear." (99-100)

This too is much like the Panopticon, with the guards in the middle and the prisoners on the outside. The concept of prioritizing some individuals over another is taken to another level when we have a digital method of surveillance that is as interactive as this. The more some engage, the more others, the less interactive individuals, are pushed out. For Mae's place of work, this hierarchy includes a "Popularity Rank" and a "Participation Rank" (101). With this, comes an "algorithm-generated number that takes into account all your activity in the InnerCircle" (101). As Gina explains to Mae, this algorithm "takes into account zings, exterior followers of your intra-company zings, comments on your zings, your comments on others' zings, your comments on other Circle's profiles, your photos posted, attendance at Circle events—basically it collects and celebrates all you do here" (101). Essentially, the more you are *hooked*, the more you are praised.

### **3.4 Surveillance Progression**

Outside of this novel, in reality, surveillance has progressed at almost an exact rate. We not only have hidden cameras on street corners and in businesses, like Annie admits that the Circle is doing, we are now interacting with certain surveillance models (63). Phones are now used as the main source of contact, and everything we do through them is surveilled. We not only text our friends and send emails, we save passwords and bank information to the keychain. We back up our lives to the cloud, and post, comment, and like nonstop. Ironically, we share more online than we do in person with most people, and yet, our online identity is that which is most surveilled with information being stored by tech companies and the government.

We are also surveilled by what we choose to interact with. Whether that is our work, school, or even the grocery store, we choose to be a part of organizations and institutions that regulate our

actions. As Gilles DeLeuze writes in “Postscript on the Societies of Control” when explaining the disciplinary societies of the eighteenth and nineteenth century addressed by Foucault, such as the Panopticon, “The individual never ceases passing from one closed environment to another, each having its own laws: first, the family; then the school... the hospital; possibly the prison (DeLeuze 1). DeLeuze labels these places as *societies of control*, because they decide and thus condition our actions. If we go to church, there are a certain order of actions that occur during the mass, and even a certain order of thoughts and prayers that we are taught to follow along with. When we go to school, students are asked to head their papers with an MLA format and to follow certain classroom customs that we are conditioned to follow, such as pushing in our chairs when we stand, raising our hand to speak, and taking notes on what is written on the board. We are influenced by that which surveils us. For Mae, the Circle is a “society of control”; such control includes information being released on her profile about her affiliations and travels. She does not even have to post something for others to know her history. Merely by searching her travel history and web history, information about her can be obtained and released (110-111). Though, just as quickly as some of these structures enclose us, we have to remember that they can also be easily altered or tampered with. The physical all-glass lunchroom is an intimidating method of surveillance that is all encompassing, but it is also fragile. However, these digital forms of surveillance are all pervasive and trying to undo them is next to impossible, and yet, there is a possibility for distortion through digital hacking. The compromising of such a structure could be dangerous to society, similar to how glass is sharp and could be dangerous to the touch of one’s skin (Gouck 58). In the case of the Circle, characters like Mae are becoming so reliant on it functioning that its demise could be threatening to society.

### 3.5 Technological Interaction

The more we engage with our devices, the more information we are choosing to share with those that are *listening*. In the Netflix documentary, *The Social Dilemma*,<sup>7</sup> the backside of technology is exposed. When we initially think of our phones and computers, we might identify them as tools. When we think of the platforms accessible to us on these devices, we might think of them as resources that we can use to help us connect with one-another, and none of these perspectives would be wrong. However, over time, technology, like the platform that we see used in Eggers' text *The Circle*, has been manipulated. Now our phones surveil our web searches and can even listen in on our conversations with the Siri feature. Our technology is interactive, and thus our surveillance mechanisms are now interactive too. The thing that society has constructed us to be most reliant on, also doubles as our worst enemy. In *The Social Dilemma* documentary, viewers are introduced to a series of individuals who were pioneers in the tech industry. In the first five minutes of the documentary, one reporter admits that he thinks that the “tools being created today are starting to erode the fabric of how society works” (Orlowski 00:05:10). Being privy to the backside of these companies like Facebook, Pinterest, and Instagram, several of the individuals present in the documentary have since left working for these companies and for some, the tech industry all together. Tim Kendal, who is the former president of Pinterest and the former executive of Facebook, left Facebook in 2017 for ethical reasons and he created his own company called Moment to counteract the work that is being done by these larger monopoly companies (Orlowski 00:00:30). In the documentary, Kendall tells viewers that, “If you are paying for the product, then you are the product” (Orlowski 00:13:26). By this, he means that we

---

<sup>7</sup> *The Social Dilemma*. Orlowski Jeff. Exposure Labs. 26 January 2020. *Netflix*.

are no longer just users of our devices. Companies are manipulating what we view and whom we interact with. They can, whether we notice it or not, manipulate our thoughts and interactions based on what they choose to show to certain users. As Gouck argues, “This level of surveillance results in a shift in the way in which its subjects are viewed. Humans, like Mae, are no longer viewed as such; rather, they are seen as robot-like beings which can be ‘figured out’ through algorithms and formulae” (Gouck 59). They are also using these platforms to gather and store our information, and both this and the content control happens through a process of constant surveillance. Essentially, in the tech world, apps are competing for our attention. This attention is what is sold to advertisers (Orlowski 00:14:20). Through this selling of our attention, the advertisers and apps work together to manipulate what we see and read. It is then through “the gradual, slight, imperceptible change in your own behavior and perception that is the product,” you, being manipulated (Orlowski 00:14:23). Essentially, this type of modern surveillance is a form of capitalism, and capitalism is profiting off of us, the users (Orlowski 00:15:45). The more technology we buy, and the more we use it, the more we are surveilled, and the more the companies and advertisers profit. It is a vicious cycle. Why do you think that Apple hypes up the new phone whenever it comes out? They want users to be attached or *hooked*, and they have even manipulated the algorithms for our phones and apps to ping us with random app notifications and they use the algorithms to filter the content to our interests to ensure this success rate.

Like Mae, we have a technological pattern. For Mae this becomes checking her technology as soon as she rises in the morning. As seen in the text, and as explained in the documentary *The Social Dilemma*, when we neglect our technology, we are quickly reminded of it with a ping or notification of a random email or Facebook reminder. For Mae, this happens when she sees

Annie at work and then proceeds to neglect her technology for twenty minutes (114). By Annie's ninth message she is saying, "It's been 25 mins. What is up?" (114) In the case of our technology, this is because our usage patterns are being tracked, just like Mae's digital social interaction patterns are tracked in *The Circle*. As Jeff Seibert, the former Executive at Twitter, says in *The Social Dilemma* documentary, "Everything you do online is being carefully monitored... what you look at and how long you look at it" (Orlowski 00:16:42). Further, "[T]hey know when you are lonely, when you are depressed, if you are looking at your ex-romantic partner, what you are doing late at night" (Orlowski 00:16:46). This technology is no longer merely a tool, because now deceit and sneakiness are at the center of every decision for these companies, with a changed goal that now focuses on using technology to keep users *hooked* (Orlowski 00:21:58). The algorithms behind these systems of surveillance were originally created as a way to tailor the information we saw in order to cater to our interests. But now, these algorithms and models of surveillance are taking on a life of their own, and this follows a similar pattern to what we see in the novel (Orlowski 00:38:40). Mae's work starts as a way of connecting individuals and ends by destroying some. The technological interaction that takes place on screen surpasses the physical one in terms of importance, and lives are hurt.

### **3.6 Online Identity**

With this level of attachment comes an adjustment to our identity. Like Mae, we have formed an online identity. As Tim Rayner writes in his piece "Foucault and Social Media: Life in a Virtual Panopticon," "Social Media is a vehicle for identity-formation" (1).<sup>8</sup> We share content online

---

<sup>8</sup> Rayner, Tim. "Foucault and Social Media: Life in a Virtual Panopticon." *Philosophy for Change: Ideas that Make a Difference*. 21 June 2021.

transparently, without holding back in what we share and with no fear of possible negative response, and this “act of sharing is a performance, to an extent” (Rayner 1). As Rayner explains, we do this to be seen. If we wanted to have photos for personal memory, we would take them on our phone or camera and save them in a file. Instead, we have been conditioned that we must post and share to stay relevant. By posting and taking part in this performative act, we are susceptible to affirmation from our friends and family through likes, comments, and reshares. As Sherry Turkle notes in her book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, the famous play *As You Like It* opens with the soliloquy “All the world’s a stage” (Turkle 216). The statement in Shakespeare’s soliloquy remains true, with the social platforms made available to us through technology having become a digital stage for characters like Mae and for present day users. As Foucault argues in his work *Panopticism*<sup>9</sup>, “Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance; under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth... We are neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of its mechanism” (504). Similarly with technology, we are breaking the fourth wall with our online interactions, and are choosing to not only put on a performance, but rather become part of the performative act, and this structures our identity. We are adopting the rules that technology companies and online platforms have developed and continue to develop, and we are internalizing them in a way that informs the way we act.

---

<sup>9</sup> Parker, Robert Dale. *Critical Theory: A Reader for Literary and Cultural Studies: Panopticism*. Oxford University Press. New York, NY. 24 January 2012.

For Mae, her coworkers give her praises day-in and day-out. The more she shares, likes, comments, and responds to customers, the more accolades she receives. She continues to work as hard as she does in order to continue receiving this type of recognition. Similar to how Foucault describes the cells in the prison as being “like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible,” Mae is now becoming a digital prisoner, performing in hopes that all see and recognize her “work” (Foucault 199). Essentially, her work is no longer driven by her personal desire to succeed, but rather, is now driven by her desire to receive “applause” for her performance. When she pushes to be recognized as part of the T2K group, the upper 2,000 at the Circle, she works only to be noticed, in a performative fashion (193). We see this type of performance come about around the middle of the text, when Mae starts becoming completely engrossed in the Circle:

By ten o'clock, just when she was tiring, and when she'd gotten as high as 2,188, she had the revelation that she was young, and she was strong, and if he worked through the night, one night without sleep, she could crack the T2K while everyone else was unconscious. She fortified herself with an energy drink and gummy worms, and when the caffeine and sugar kicked in, she felt invincible. The third's InnerCircle wasn't enough. She turned on her OuterCircle feed, and was handling that without difficulty. She pushed forward, signing up for a few hundred more Zing feeds, starting with a comment on each. She was soon at 2,012 and now she was really getting resistance. (194)

For Mae, this level of affirmation gives her the strength to work through the night, in hopes of progressing her score past 2,000 (194). Her performance and the response she receives from it, alters her work ethic. Mae's online interaction is driven by her conditioned need to “succeed.” She stays up all night commenting, liking, and signing up for more feeds (194). Her compulsion with being successful drives her to be more-and-more tethered to her device, or rather more tethered to “the gratifications offered by their [her] online devices” (Turkle 125). We see this compulsion lead to a heightened digital anxiety for Mae. In a moment where she does not know

where certain people are and what they are doing, she fills with anxiety (Eggers 194). She cannot stand the concept of the unknown in the same way that the prisoners of the Panopticon are always unsure of who is jailed in the cell next to them and who is watching them. This leads her to spiral into a messaging frenzy, attempting to locate Kalden, her lover, and Annie in the middle of the night (196). With this kind of behavior, we become more reliant on our devices, and these modes of surveillance. We are forming a relationship with them, and as Sherry Turkle notes in her work “Always-on/Always-on-you: the Tethered Self,” “For many who enjoy online life, it is easier to express intimacy in the virtual world than in “RL” or real life” (Turkle 125).<sup>10</sup> For many that fear creating a bond in person, online life is a sort of security blanket that we can hide behind, and we enter into an “identity workshop” (Turkle 125). Truthfully, we never graduate from working on our identity, whether it is online or not. We continue “to work on it with the materials we have at hand,” and with the way platforms work in the text and real life, these materials may not always be the most ideal or positive (Turkle 125).

Unfortunately, similar to the digital anxiety that Mae experiences in the text, we are now seeing teens experience a similar anxiety more often than not. As displayed in the documentary *The Social Dilemma* and as discussed by Turkle in her text, “The anxiety that teens report when they are without their cell phones or their link to the Internet may not speak so much to missing the easy sociability with others but of missing the self that is constituted in these relationships” (Turkle 127). When we are online, we can be hooked to a group identity, and without this identity, through the connections of our phones, we get anxiety. When we are online we feel as

---

<sup>10</sup> Turkle, Sherry. “Always-on/Always-on-you: the Tethered Self.” In *Handbook of Mobile Communication Studies*, James E. Katz (ed.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008.

though we can be whomever we want to be. We can use filters and editing apps to adjust other's perception of us, as well as our perception of ourselves. We can put on a mask and play dress up for awhile, but sometimes we get lost in this imaginary world. Sometimes we forget who we really are. "The cell phone takes this effect to a higher power because the device is always available" (Turkle 128). Technology is not the cause of us putting on a mask to project a different identity, but it definitely enables it (Turkle 128). Technology also enables our need to be validated (Turkle 128). We become comfortable with these communication methods, and we start to connect more and share more. We start to trust these platforms and these devices, all the while being surveilled. We become hooked to the feelings we form in response to certain pings and zings, much like Mae, and we try to recreate these feelings by staying engaged with this surveillance model (Turkle 128) For Mae, this happens when she is sending over 7,000 smiles (our version of likes) in half a day:

Word spread through the InnerCircle, and Mae was sent 7,716 smiles by noon. Everyone had known she could do it. Everyone saw great things for her at the Circle, everyone was certain she would graduate from CE in no time, as soon as September, because rarely had anyone risen so quickly through the PartiRank (Participation Rank) and with such laser-like focus. Mae's new feeling of competence and confidence carried her through the week. (193)

This is not something just teens have become accustomed to, but adults as well. A lot of what we are doing online has shifted to task-based work, instead of performance-based work (Turkle 129). This style of work was previously prevalent with assembly line style work, but now we are seeing it with customer service and social connection based work, like the Customer Experience roll that Mae is in. Instead of being focused on the quality of work that we deliver, we are now focusing on checking the to-dos off of our list. It is now more than ever about the total amount of things that we can get done in the day, rather than the process of working through the task. Even

the way we talk about what we do in our online life has shifted, from “composing an email” to “doing my email” (Turkle 129). Here again, we are seeing slight shifts over time that move away from the idea of the individual. Instead, we move closer and closer to the group mentality. We become more consumed with the idea of completing the assignment, which focuses on responding and therefore pleasing the mass, rather than spending the time to compose an individualized email to create a customized experience. Much like the congregation at mass, even though you may be an individual, the power (of the church and congregation in this instance) still holds you in a way that will always have your individual self-fitting into the masses. Sherry Turkle effectively quotes Donna Haraway in her work *Life on the Screen* when she writes, “The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly; and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be an other” (Turkle 261). We are never completely finished in our development, therefore we always have the ability to grow and develop, and much like Mae, we are able to mold in a way that fits a group identity. Since there is a part of us that is moldable, we may think that we are choosing to be and act a certain way, but we are inherently conditioned by what we view and hear, all of which is manipulated by these platforms. As Tim Rayner wrote in his piece “Foucault and Social Media: Life in a Virtual Panopticon,” “Effective use of social media implies selecting and framing content with a view of pleasing and/or impressing a certain crowd” (Rayner 2). This is similar to how Foucault describes the Panopticon selecting and framing particular behavior:

With this exception, the Panopticon also does the work of a naturalist. It makes it possible to draw up differences: among patients, to observe the symptoms of each individual, without the proximity of beds, the circulation of miasmas, the effects of contagion confusing the clinical tables; among schoolchildren, it makes it possible to observe performances (without there being any imitation or copying), to map aptitudes, to assess characters, to draw up rigorous classifications and, in relation to normal

development, to distinguish ‘laziness and stubbornness’ from ‘incurable imbecility’; among workers, it makes it possible to note the aptitudes of each worker, compare the time he takes to perform a task, and if they are paid by the day, to calculate their wages. (Foucault 203)

The subjects of the Panopticon internalize these frames. Our thoughts are not as free as we would like to think. Instead, we are as normal and group-centered as our social security number. We are no more unique than the next person; merely a string of numbers run together because our thoughts are influenced by the content that is preselected for us by our social platforms. In a way, technology, with the help of its online surveillance mechanisms, is making us all act robotic. As Gilles DeLeuze notes in his work “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” “The disciplines never saw any incompatibility between these two [the individual and the masses] at the same time power individualizes and masses together, that is, constitutes those over whom it exercises power into a body and molds the individuality of each member of that body” (DeLueuze 5). These disciplines include institutionalized meaning structures like schools, prisons, and business corporations.

Psychologically, we are also not as “free” as we would like to believe. Much like Bentham’s Panopticon, “being made constantly visible impacts on us psychologically” (Rayner 2). When we are online, we are always being watched, and we know that. If we search laser tag one time on the Internet, the next thing you know, five different ads for laser tag pop up while we are scrolling through Facebook and Instagram. For the Panopticon, “The prisoners in the cells are perpetually exposed to the gaze of the guards in the tower, yet they cannot themselves see into the tower, they are never certain whether or not they are being watched” (Rayner 2). For us, and for Mae, we are never sure when Facebook, Instagram, Apple, or the Circle are watching, so we condition ourselves to be on our best behavior, whether this is posting presentable pictures or making sure our internet searches are clean. In *The Circle*, in Mae’s case, she begins to be

conditioned “at Circle social events, to nurse one drink only, and tried each time to leave it unfinished” (331). Even in her own home, when she wants to have a full glass of sake, she turns off the SeeChange camera, in fear of judgment from others (336). Mae becomes consumed by the concept of being a role model for mothers and daughters and could not bear to smear her name (331). Mae can turn off her SeeChange camera, but she knows that they are always listening, so like our version of Alexa, she becomes conditioned to just leave it on all the time. Why should anything be private anyways?

We carry on this kind of conditioning outside of the digital realm as well, the same way prisoners carry out self-regulation long after their release (Rayner 2). As Rayner reveals, we live in a sort of virtual Panopticon. In this prison, we are all guards and all prisoners, always on duty to watch and be watched (Rayner 2). This state of consciousness leads to the functioning of the power that these platforms and these systems have over us. Eventually, this leads to the control that our mind has over us, all influenced by the power of surveillance. Our online identity is not a place where “you are who you pretend to be,” but rather a composite of that which surrounds us (Turkle 192).

### **3.7 Not That Far Off**

In Mae’s world, we come to learn that not all the characters agree with this intensified interaction with the online world. Mercer, her parents’ friend, admits to Mae that he believes it all to be a series of gossip. He tells her that, “Your tools have elevated gossip, hearsay and conjecture to the level of valid, mainstream communication” (133). As the technology begins to intensify, Mae and the workings of the Circle drive others like Mercer away. This is partially due to the level in which technology is intervening in the private sphere. Starting with something as simple as facial

recognition in photos, the capabilities of the Circle starts to expand far beyond the social interactions of likes, comments, and posts (251). Before they know it, the Circle can “collect data on your heart rate, blood pressure, cholesterol, heat flux, caloric intake, sleep duration, sleep quality, digestive efficiency, on and on” (155). It is no longer a social platform, but now it is extending itself into the medical field. This may seem far off, but some of these capabilities are built into Apple products, such as the Apple watch. The level of surveillance in this novel accelerates into counting numbers of steps taken, and recommending a total step count to reach (156). Again, these are all capabilities that can be found on our Apple watch surveillance device. The company that Mae worked for in *The Circle* parallels some of our largest tech companies that exist today. All the apps and technological devices that come out now and that come out in the novel are marketed as “features” rather than surveillance. The idea is to have everyone, the consumers, wearing and using these products, to sell products through the peer pressure that pushes everyone to fit a mold. As is discussed in the novel, the idea is to “close the circle.” This is the goal that:

There would be complete information-sharing among all of these previously disconnected and even adversarial entities, and when they were coordinated, and once all the health data they’d collect was shared, most of this made possible through the Circle and more important, TruYou, viruses could be stopped at their sources, diseases would be tracked to their roots. (337)

The first time that complete information-sharing is within reach is the day that the Center for Disease Control and all the world health agencies are helicoptered in to make the universal health plan and TruYou a reality (337). The more the circle closes in this story, essentially the more the Circle and governmental services merge, the more characters like Mercer are being pushed out due to their rejection of technology. This is the goal, to make those that are disconnected feel left out so they are inclined to tap into things, so that “the gaps will quickly be

filled” (352). By the second half of the novel, the completion of the circle is about eight months out (353). As with the Panopticon and described in *The Circle*, “Outside the walls of the Circle, all was noise and struggle, failure and filth. But here, all had been perfected” (31). The Circle is putting on a façade of a perfect world, working to entice everyone to join in. The Circle is pushing out millions of models of surveillance cameras and screens to review the footage, in a very capitalist fashion, in hopes of driving sales (69). The Circle is also driving the sales of several features that the Circle offers, such as user surveys and posting and review capabilities. With this too came the concept of offering health plans, so that everyone’s health history can be accessed with a tap of the finger, stored in the cloud (158). The Circle even begins to produce wrist monitors that can sense “non-normative rates of stress,” the “pH levels of your sweat,” and “can tell you when you need to hydrate with alkaline water” (155). Simultaneously happening with the Circle’s company is a push to start CircleMoney, “A way to send all online purchases through the Circle and, eventually, obviate the need for paper currency at all” (173). With Apple pay, this concept is alive and thriving. The overall goal is to universalize this information into one space, through the use of the programs TruYou and PastPerfect (which stores the individual’s information) combined with the Circle as the platform. For TruYou, “you have to be a real person, with a real address, complete personal info, a real Social Security number, a real and verifiable date of birth,” much like our REAL ID (388). The Circle hopes to offer license renewal (393). The company even begins to track “how many people voted in the last national election” and offers for people to “register and update your registration online” (387). The workers of the Circle begin to ask, “What if your Circle profile *automatically* registered you to vote?” (388) They want to be able to “cross-reference any voting polls with the names in our [the] TruYou database, and you’d [to] find half the missing voters right there and then” (392).

This is led by the idea of there being “no more candidates who had been elected by a fringe, wedge group” and “to eliminate all costly elections, replaced by instantaneous ones, all of them nearly cost-free” (389-395). With a few exceptions, these inventions and online features are already something that can be found in our very own world.

### **3.8 Pros and Cons of Surveillance**

With all these surveillance models, there are definitely pros and cons, but primarily this dystopian novel is working to attack and satirize these kinds of surveillance. It is a reflection on the harms produced by a loss of privacy and the digitization of daily life. Clearly some of the cons include having your entire life on broadcast. When Mae learns of her father’s heart attack, and rushes to his side, she is scolded for not sharing this information online (183). She is guilted into admitting that she was in fact not present, as if being technologically and physically present carry the same weight (183). The meaning of the word present is distorted by Denise to make Mae feel a certain guilt about her own actions, and she is made to feel as though she were depriving viewers of some very important content. In what world is it essential to stream that horrid information? None. This situation, per usual, is tied back to ratings and Mae is reprimanded for her declining Participation Rank (184). This sort of backwards punishment continues through to Mae’s conversation with Josiah, as the two, Denise and Josiah, work to manipulate Mae’s feelings through digital attachment (188-189). Again, this idea of using surveillance to control behavior goes too far. For some characters in text, they are forced to grapple with the idea of having to feel compelled to upload their entire life onto a digital platform, to be streamed and accessed by others at the touch of a button (200/205). This is something that *The Social Dilemma* forces us to acknowledge and grapple with as well. For Mae,

this battle with her conscience is best shown after she concludes her interview with Human Resources employee Denise:

After the interview, at her desk, Mae scolded herself. What kind of person was she? More than anything, she was ashamed. She'd been doing the bare minimum. She disgusted herself and felt for Annie. Surely Annie had been hearing about her deadbeat friend Mae, who took this gift this coveted job at the Circle—a company that had insured her parents! Had saved them from familial catastrophe!—and had been skating through. *Goddamnit, Mae, give a shit!* She thought. *Be a person of some value to the world.* (190-191)

In this interview, Mae is forced to battle with doing the right thing for the sake of her friend Annie, or to do what will continue to progress her in her career at the Circle. Based on the conversation that she has with her conscience, she clearly chooses herself in that moment and neglects the impact that her actions will have on Annie. When it comes to the “closing the circle” presentation with one of the Circle’s Three Wise Men Tom Stenton, Santos, a Congresswoman, agrees to do her part by becoming transparent, which is in line with the Circle’s goal of ultimate transparency from elected leaders (208). In the theme of total transparency, Santos admits that her life is accessible via broadcast until the minute she goes to sleep (210). Breaking this down to the pros and cons of surveillance, no one needs to hear your every thought and opinion. For Santos, she says that “You’re either accountable or you’re not”, arguing that transparent and accountable are synonyms (210).

In the novel, “The pressure on those who hadn’t gone transparent went from polite to oppressive,” and this is where the cons of this level of surveillance come in (241). This expectation for transparency meant putting all personal information online, and allowing for everything to be surveilled through digital and audio surveillance. At one point in the novel, “Within weeks, the non-transparent officeholders were treated like pariahs. The clear ones wouldn’t meet with them if they wouldn’t go on cameras, and thus these leaders were left out”

(241-242). These world leaders are being isolated because they are not willing to put their lives on blast. Based on this negative response, it makes sense why individuals would be against this level of intense surveillance and would steer clear of putting their lives on blast. For the Circle though, not being transparent is not an option. “There would be only clarity, only light” (242). Ironically again, this verbiage paints this image of positive surveillance, but that is not at all what is going on in this text. To be sure, Mae and her coworkers felt as though they could influence global decisions for the best (243), and yes it is great that “the EMTs can access everything about your history in seconds,” but what about hackers and people that do not have your best interest at heart? (158) There is a fine line between helpful and controlling, and the Circle is beginning to cross this line. The Circle is beginning to post cameras all over, in hopes of catching human rights abuse, crimes, and murders worldwide, but this would mean simultaneously watching those that did nothing wrong as well (65). Bailey, one of the Three Wise Men that run the Circle, says that secrets are “cancerous when kept within us,” and that “secrets are the enablers of antisocial, immoral and destructive behavior”, but Mercer would argue that it is okay to keep some things personal (291). It is okay to value your privacy.

When it comes to the pros of surveillance, sometimes conditioned behavior could be beneficial. In the way that the Panopticon is tied to the conditioning of prisoners’ behavior, the Circle envisions how they will reduce crime with their services, by registering public sex offenders and committed crimes (423). Bailey admits to this being a goal of the Circle; to be able to record the account, have proof so that a punishment can be given, and so the person can be conditioned to change their actions moving forward (282-283). Having this type of leverage over an individual would make committing a crime difficult to go unnoticed (425). Also, the Circle explains how it is a platform that is receptive to individuals that “came out of the closet” and that the Circle is a

welcoming space of connection for the gay community (286). In the text, Bailey notes the release of the Pentagon Papers, and that the outcome of this release led to better behavior by the diplomats (287). If everyone knew any given individual's business, that individual would probably figure that they should be on their best behavior.

### **3.9 New Relationships with Surveillance**

Mae says, "that secrets are lies," which is a perspective shaped by Bailey's extreme panopticism (299). Though the novel clearly argues that secrets are not meant to be shared, the series events between Mae and Mercer can cause readers to question whether they think all private thoughts are meant to go viral. The confusion in this statement "that secrets are lies" is the thinking that privacy and lies are the same thing. To lie is to choose to not tell the truth, but to have privacy is to value certain actions and thoughts as your own, and choosing not to share them because it is not a matter that requires other's opinions. Baily asks, "Why shouldn't everyone see whatever it is they want to see?" (302). Should everyone see the information about Annie's parents' open marriage? (Eggers 440). The Circle teaches its users and employees that "PRIVACY IS THEFT" and "SECRETS ARE LIES," but at what point is your life not your own? (305) At what point is utilizing surveillance to establish societal norms and collective transparency more valued than the individual themselves? Annie falls prey to the group motto until she comes to see the truth of surveillance being a weapon. Once her own family's life is put on blast, she admits that she does not "know if we should know everything" (439). Annie was once the face of this concept of open access, but now she is reconsidering the repercussions. She is beginning to think for herself and weigh the consequences. She now knows that not everything is public business.

Bailey explains the idea of us being compelled to be our best selves through total surveillance. Bailey believes that such panopticism will lead to the “perfectibility” of humans, asking rhetorically, “What if we *all* behaved as if we were being watched?” (292-3) He believes that having surveillance in all modes of life, all the time, will lead individuals to essentially be perfect. He argues that “we could finally be compelled to be our best selves” (292). If that were the case, however, we would not be *ourselves*. We would be mere copies of one another, constantly living in the fear of a larger power.

As the Circle begins to close, reflecting the logo of the company, everything becomes accessible, and thus surveilled (289). The blind followers, like Mae, are pulling enough people into the InnerCircle, and yet, not many know what it means for the circle to be closed. Also, in the case of most large groups, a single individual is afraid to speak out, so instead of anyone asking questions about the completion, no one does (325). Instead, this completion becomes a game of loyalty, and for those, like Mae’s parents, who do not want to be involved, they still find themselves participating in the community of the Circle. This is because this level of surveillance is dipping its hands into so many avenues of life, that it now controls medicine, and in the case of Mae’s father, he relies on this level of surveillance to live (325). In her father’s case, the more information that the Circle’s medical team can gather, the better (360-361). Even so, the loss of privacy becomes too much for Mae’s parents, and “they, like Mercer, insist that Mae cease to contact them unless privately” (374).

Mercer, Mae’s family friend, does not want his business publicized. When Mae posts a picture of his chandelier that is in his dining room, he loses it (258). He is one of the few people that stays true to himself and rejects the Circle. He values his privacy, and he and Kalden, Mae’s temporary lover, fear the richer interior world is depleting, and Mercer does not want to

contribute to this decline. Time and time again he expresses this frustration to Mae, but she, stuck in a panoptic gaze, cannot wrap her mind around the idea of not wanting to be entangled in an interactive surveillance model. She is in too deep and is brainwashed into thinking that she is helping Mercer. She cannot fathom the idea of someone wanting to be outside of the Circle, and Mercer again tries to explain to her how the individual (at the Circle) is unaware of what the collective group is doing in terms of mass surveillance (261). He fears someone having this large amount of power over him and others, and so he rejects participation. Mercer knows that Mae is being blinded by the affirmation that comes with this level of surveillance, and at some point, it is far past worth trying to explain over and over, so Mercer writes Mae one final letter:

“Dear Mae,

Yes, you can and should read this on camera. I expected that you would, so I’m writing this letter not only to you, but to your “audience.” Hello, audience.

I can’t see you anymore, Mae. Not that we had such a constant or perfect friendship anyway, but I can’t be your friend and also part of your experiment. I’ll be sad to lose you, as you have been important in my life. But we’ve taken very different evolutionary paths and very soon we’ll be too far apart to communicate.

If you saw your parents, and your mom gave you this note, then you saw the effect all your stuff has had on them. I wrote this note after seeing them, both of them strung out, exhausted by the deluge you unleashed on them. It’s too much, Mae. And it’s not right. I helped them cover some of the cameras. I even bought the fabric. I was happy to do it. They don’t want to be smiled upon, or frowned upon, or zinged. They want to be alone. And not watched. Surveillance shouldn’t be the tradeoff for any goddamn service we get.

If things continue this way, there will be two societies—or at least I hope there will be two—the one you’re helping to create, and an alternative to it. You and your ilk will like, willingly, joyfully, under constant surveillance, watching each other always, commenting on each other, voting and liking and disliking each other, smiling and frowning, and otherwise doing nothing much else.

I will always wish all good things for you, Mae. I also hope, though I realize how unlikely it is, that somewhere down the line, when the triumphalism of you and your peers—the unrestrained Manifest Destiny of it all—goes too far and collapses into itself, that you’ll regain your sense of perspective, and your humanity. Hell, what am I saying? It’s already gone too far. What I should say is that I await the day when some vocal

minority finally rises up to *say* it's gone too far, and that this tool, which is far more insidious than any human invention that's come before it, must be checked, regulated, turned back, and that, most of all, we need options for opting out. We are living in a tyrannical state now, where we are not allowed to-" (369-371).

This letter continues on for several more pages, but essentially Mercer does not want to become the lobster or the turtle that are being circled by the shark in the tank for the surveillance demonstration that is ran by Mae and Georgia (319). The lobster and the turtle that are circled and devoured by the shark are similar to the prisoner who is being watched by the guard—though in this dystopian scenario, the guard has become a predator—and this is not something or someone that Mercer wants to become. For this reason, he is choosing to disconnect from Mae and help her parents do the same. He hopes that Mae will come to her senses. He also thinks that by removing himself from Mae and her world, that he will achieve his desired freedom, but instead, he does become this lobster and the prisoner.

For Mercer, this surveillance comes back to attack him. In a drone demo, he is used as the ginny pig for Mae's demonstration. Mae's demonstration starts by utilizing the Circle community and surveillance to track a fugitive in England, and upon her successful mission, there is a request to continue the demonstration. Mae decides to track Mercer, and "within ninety second there were hundreds of posts from people who knew him—from grade school, high school, college, work" (457). With the context provided by a photo, his house is located, and cameras begin to track him in his driveway (460). As he again, this time physically, works to escape the digital dungeon, "Mae, simply demonstrating their SoulSearch program," uses the drone and its program to talk to Mercer. Infuriated, he speeds off, and this escalates Mae's desire to communicate with him. "Now she could see another two drones on the passenger-side window. A new voice, male, boomed from one of them: "Mercer, you motherfucker! Stop driving, you fucking asshole!" (464). In a spiraling turn of events, "The truck broke through and leapt into the gorge, and, for a

brief moment, seemed to fly, the mountains visible for miles beyond. And then the truck dropped from view” (465). The technology that was once meant to make the world better and more unified drives Mercer to kill himself. In that moment, Mae is overtaken with emotion, and she soon after realizes that the richer interior of the world is in fact depleting. The relationships that should matter to her are farther away now, and the company that she thinks could offer her the world, drives away those that she values deep down. Of course, those like Bailey try to console Mae that Mercer’s death is not her fault when they try to rationalize that she was “trying to help a very disturbed, antisocial young man” (466). To them, he was all of these things, because he rejected everything that they stood for. Bailey even goes as far as to compare the situation to that of a doctor and patient, saying, “It’s like you were a doctor, coming to help a sick patient, and the patient, upon seeing this doctor, jumps out of the window. You can hardly be blamed” (467). To no surprise, she says that “there’d be no chance of that happening if Mercer was in a self-driving vehicle,” as if technology and surveillance are the answer to everything (467).

Mae has not only lost her friend and family, she is forced to reconcile with the reality that she has created, though she is reluctant to do so because she is too brainwashed by the Circle. Instead, it is Kalden, who turns out to be the initial creator of the Circle, who not only tries to talk some sense into Mae, but also has to come to grips with the reality that is upon him as a result of the monster he has created. He admits:

“Mae, I didn’t intend any of this to happen. And it’s moving too fast. This idea of Completion, it’s far beyond what I had in mind when I started all this, and it’s far beyond what’s right. It has to be brought back into some kind of balance. Mae, the Circle can’t close.” (485)

Now it is not only Mercer who has seen the depth of the impact that the Circle is having on their world, but Annie, Kaplan, and Mae's parents too. And yet, Mae is still blinded. She reflects, "The elegance of it all, the ideological purity of the Circle, of real transparency, gave her peace, a warming feeling of logic and order" (419).

It is not until the final pages of the text that she assesses the true repercussions of complete surveillance. It is not until this time that she truly thinks about what it really means to close the circle, and that complete surveillance can in fact jeopardize the existence of the individual. When Kalden asks Mae to run away with him, she still does not realize the severity of closing the circle. She decides that she wants to stay in the Circle, and yet:

Mae pictured all this. She pictured the Circle being taken apart, sold off amid scandal, thirteen thousand people out of jobs, the campus overtaken, broken up, turned into a college or mall or something worse. And finally she pictured life on a boat with this man, sailing the world, untethered, but when she tried to, she saw, instead, the couple on the barge she'd met months ago on the bay. Out there, alone, living under a tarp, drinking wine from paper cups, naming seals, reminiscing about island fires. At that moment, Mae knew what she needed to do. (491)

She does not want to end up like the isolated couple, but after confirming that her and Kalden could not be heard, she could admit that she saw everything clearly now (491). Mae maintains her position at The Circle, rats out Kalden, continues to be disconnected from her parents, and is still blinded by her panoptic gaze and the vision of the Circle completion.

# 4 Conclusion

## 4.1 Concluding Thoughts

Mae's character trajectory, which follows her growing attachment to the Circle, parallels society's growing attachment to technology. Though we would like to think that the Panopticon structure and its surveillance mechanisms are far off, they are in fact currently embedded in society's structures, technology, and platforms. Mae's character arc is just one representation of the how technology can take over our lives and shift the way we act, interact, and respond to others. Our interactive surveillance mechanisms, which were once tools, have matured into weapons that decide the information we see. This information in turn molds our online identity and also shifts our in-person/real identity. Technology and its social platforms and manipulative algorithms make up a modern version of Bentham's Panopticon. The New Panopticon, a term coined by Jennifer Gouck in her work "The Viewer Society: 'New Panopticism', Surveillance, and the Body in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*"<sup>11</sup>, is here and it is here to stay. The level surveillance that Mae experiences in her world is just as invasive as the level of surveillance that we are currently experiencing. As described in the documentary *The Social Dilemma*, this technological growth and control is at an upward trend. It is only going to continue to intensify. Essentially, "the circle" is only going to continue working to close. In our case, the large technology companies are only going to continue to grow and gain control of all the facets of human life. *The Circle* might have been labeled as a dystopian novel when it was first published in 2014, but Mae's world and the world of the Circle are now our reality. It was a foreshadowing of the

---

<sup>11</sup> Gouck, Jennifer. "The Viewer Society: 'New Panopticism', Surveillance, and the Body in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*." *IJAS Online*, 2018, No. 7, Special Postgraduate Issue (2018), pp. 57-64.

technological monster that we have been forced to coexist with and rely on. The point is, this weapon is not going away. It will continue to dig deeper into the crevices of our lives, in order to gain control of as much of our information as possible, as well as to be able to inform as many of our decisions as possible. Technology was designed as a tool, but like Mae, we need to inform ourselves on how it works so that we can live harmoniously and not upset the balance between the real world and the digital realm.

## 5 Bibliography

- Atwood, Margaret. "When Privacy is Theft". *The New York Review*. New York, NY. 21 November 2013.
- Bentham, Jeremy. *Panopticon; or, The Inspection House*. London, Reprinted and sold by T. Payne, 1791, Volume 2.
- Bumas, E. Shaskan. "Fictions of the Panopticon: Prison, Utopia, and the Out Penitent in the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne." *Project Muse*. Duke University Press, *American Literature*, Volume 73, Number 1, March 2001, pp. 121-145.
- Foucault, Michel, 1926-1984. *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.
- DeLeuze, Gilles. "Postscript on the Societies of Control." October, vol. 59, JSTOR, 1992.
- Gouck, Jennifer. "The Viewer Society: 'New Panopticism', Surveillance, and the Body in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*." *IJAS Online*, 2018, No. 7, Special Postgraduate Issue (2018), pp. 57-64.
- Parker, Robert Dale. *Critical Theory: A Reader for Literary and Cultural Studies: Panopticism*. Oxford University Press. New York, NY. 24 January 2012.
- Rayner, Tim. "Foucault and Social Media: Life in a Virtual Panopticon." *Philosophy for Change: Ideas that Make a Difference*. 21 June 2021.
- The Social Dilemma.*, Orlowski, Jeff. Exposure Labs. 26 January 2020. *Netflix*
- Turkle, Sherry. "Always-on/Always-on-you: the Tethered Self." In *Handbook of Mobile Communication Studies*, James E. Katz (ed.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008.
- Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York, NY. Touchstone, 1995.