Mastroianni Greco, Greta. 2025. "Digital Individual Freedoms in Danger in Eggers's Dystopias: Surveillance, Shame, Power, and Human Perfection." *Journal of Libertarian Studies* 28 (1): 212–27. https://doi.org/10.35297/001c.127731.

ARTICLES

# Digital Individual Freedoms in Danger in Eggers's Dystopias: Surveillance, Shame, Power, and Human Perfection

Greta Mastroianni Greco, Ph.D. & Master's Degree in Political Sciences[1a]

[1] Political Sciences, Roma Tre University

Keywords: dystopia, Dave Eggers, surveillance, techno-utopia, transhumanism

https://doi.org/10.35297/001c.127731

Journal of Libertarian Studies

Vol. 28, Issue 1, 2024

Dystopia, as both a political concept and literary genre, is currently undergoing a profound transformation, often called the digital turn. This article focuses on Dave Eggers's dystopias *The Circle* and *The Every* and analyzes the characteristics of digital dystopias. These typical elements include the pervasive digital surveillance conducted by corporations along with lateral or participatory surveillance carried out by individuals and self-surveillance practices. Additionally, the narratives explore other themes, such as social conformity enforced through public shaming, the emergence of nonstate digital or cyber-totalitarianism, and the dehumanizing implications of transhumanist ambitions. Through the examination of Eggers's novels as dystopias, this research draws comparisons with classical dystopian literature. Notably, Dave Eggers shows how the evolution of social media and apps could erode individual freedoms and privacy rights. While techno-utopianism and techno-dystopianism typically hinge on optimistic versus pessimistic perspectives of technological advancement, this study seeks to demonstrate that technology is neutral; however, it always contains a potential political value in the minds of those using it.

Utopia and dystopia are political concepts that are not defined uniformly. The dual interpretation of utopia is tied to the Greek etymology of the word itself. On one hand, the prefix *ou*, indicating negation, literally means *not*, and *topos* means *place*, combining to mean a place that does not exist, a nonplace that is as abstract as it is unattainable; on the other hand, the prefix *eu*, denoting *good*, combined with *topos*, signifying *place*, means a place of goodness—a political exercise in imagining an ideal society. The



a Greta Mastroianni Greco (gretamastroianni@libero.it) is a scholar at Roma Tre University, where she provides teaching assistance in courses on the history of political thought and gender studies. She has previously taught the course "Italian Fascism: The First Totalitarian Political Religion" at the Rome IES Abroad Foundation. Dr. Mastroianni Greco holds a PhD in the history of political thought and gender studies, a master's degree in international relations, and a specialized diploma awarded by the U.S. Embassy in Rome focusing on American presidential elections. Her doctoral research provided an analysis of contemporary American libertarian feminism.

genre of utopianism, including Plato's *Republic* as a precursor, concerns classical utopians, such as More, Campanella, and Bacon, and American feminist "'critical utopia'" (Norledge 2022, 7) between the 1960s and 1980s. Utopianism is not only a genre; in its second interpretation, it can also be classified as a philosophy and a political experiment. The term used in opposition to utopia was pronounced for the first time by John Stuart Mill in 1868 during a political speech (Uhlenbruch 2015).

Dystopia, despite the single Greek etymology where the prefix *dys* means *bad*, has two meanings closely related to the interpretations of utopia previously mentioned (Norledge 2022). The first meaning refers to dystopia as a realized utopia, emphasizing that utopia contains the seeds of its degeneration. The second meaning relates to the exact opposite of utopia, the antiutopia or negative utopia, as a critical "response to utopianism" (Norledge 2022, 4), characterized by imperfection and undesirability. In any case, dystopia will never be a hyperbolic representation of an impossible future; it is always a social critique that starts from the vulnerabilities already present in the society, constructed as a nightmare projection. This "cultural barometer" (Zeb et al. 2023, 78), as a genre, emerged in the twentieth century with classical dystopias against totalitarianism written by Orwell, Zamyatin, and Huxley, and it evolved into Italian hybrid dystopias of the 1960s and the more recent focus on digitalization.

*The Circle* and *The Every* by Dave Eggers are part of this new type of dystopia: they are not highly futuristic, not so far from reality, and present perfectly the so-called digital turn in dystopian fiction (McKenna 2023, 88). An ever-increasing body of literature shows that digital dystopias are attracting considerable interest, gaining widespread attention due to their going beyond known paradigms, testing alternative ways of conceptualizing the present and future, exploring possible futures, and issuing warnings about the consequences of current actions. This article proposes a theoretical approach to analyzing these two novels that will shed light on digital surveillance, conformity, nonstate digital totalitarianism, and dehumanization. This research aims to extend the current knowledge about the digital turn's possible future impact on individual freedom by analyzing two dystopian novels by Eggers.

Firstly, *The Circle* and its sequel, *The Every*, critique the growing power of social media, envisioning a near-future dominated by a monopolistic digital corporation that uses algorithms and pervasive digital surveillance of daily private life. Eggers satirically exposes the corporate consolidation of the monopolization of the global economy with the rise of technological tyranny (Terentowicz-Fotyga 2024, 1–12). In the company in *The Circle*, with ten thousand employees and divisions in every country, Maebelline (henceforth, Mae) Holland works in "customer experience" in the Renaissance Department with seven screens on her desk and all work-time activity

recorded. The narrative follows "Mae's struggle to maintain her sense of self while being constantly monitored" (Sadeeq 2024, 1397) and, at the end, her blind acceptance of the company's ideology as she loses her identity and becomes a personification of the human role in building a possible dystopian future. This ending follows the dystopic trope of mass compliance through the destruction of individuality, as in Zamyatin's *We* and Orwell's *1984*. In addition, as Margaret Atwood (2013) observes, Mae's screen name is MaeDay, and International Workers' Day, or May Day, as a national holiday represents Eggers's satirical aim.

In the sequel to *The Circle*, set ten years later, *The Every*, Mae has become the Big Sister watching her employees as CEO of the Every, an e-commerce behemoth named after a South American jungle. In the novel, Delaney Wells and Wes begin their journey toward infiltrating the company with unrecognized noble aspirations. The Every generates technological innovations at a breathtaking speed. Surveillance is the currency for all services for the citizens, including AnonIdea, an app that presents anonymous ideas (Eggers 2021, 115). Whenever Delaney and Wes try to sabotage the system by introducing unethical app ideas that a more thoughtful humanity would rebel against, people instead applaud these ideas and enjoy using the apps (Terentowicz-Fotyga 2024, 1–12). The campus in *The Circle* is set in California in an equivalent to Silicon Valley, but in San Vincenzo, a fictional city similar to the San Francisco Bay Area. By comparison, the campus in *The Every* is located on a human-made island called Treasure Island in the San Francisco Bay Area, recalling the utopian insular tradition and realizing an ecological dream in which no plastic or nonbiodegradable material is allowed. The cofounders and directors of the Circle, who have digital utopian dreams, are Ty Godspodinov (under the pseudonym Kalden), Eamon Bailey, and Tom Stenton. The dissenting force, trying to persuade Mae of the company's dystopian intentions, is represented by the former boyfriend of Mae Mercer (alluding to the spiritual leader of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*), the parents of Mae, and Kalden. The end of *The Circle* shows "the price of resistance" (Marks 2015, 166) through Mercer's suicide. The sudden disappearance of Kalden and Mae's parents symbolize the futility of resisting and the impossibility of escaping the pervasive control exercised by the digital system of the company (Laguarta Bueno 2018, 165–88). Similarly, in *The Every*, the personification of rebellion and protest against the company is the former university professor Meena Agarwal, seduced at the end of the novel by the company for an innovative cancer treatment.

Overall, the majority of studies primarily analyze these novels as utopias, but the "imagined perfect societies" are "inherently tyrannical," with the typical "hypocrisy, contradiction, and authoritarianism" (Herman 2018, 166) described in Plato's *Republic* and More's *Utopia*. Projecting a version of a perfect society while incorporating the critique of that society into the

narrative is typical of recent dystopian stories. These novels represent "the methodological approach" of the "utopian engineering" criticized by Karl Popper (2002, 148). His negative view of utopia presents it as inherently totalitarian and dystopian because of its dangerous centralized monopoly. In particular, traditional utopias tend to impose a uniform vision of perfection, which requires centralized and coercive control, sacrificing individual liberties in the name of an idealized common good. According to Popper, the theoretical mistake of utopia lies in believing in an existing rational method to achieve a perfect society and in considering it perfect for all individuals. Likewise, for Robert Nozick (1974), individuals have different ideals and ideas about the best of all possible worlds. In his utopian theory of the minimal state, people can create their utopian communities based on their values and desires; thus, there is no single utopia imposed on everyone. This peaceful coexistence of different utopias reflects the pluralistic and individualistic nature of the libertarian society that Nozick advocates, emphasizing freedom of association and noncoercion. In this context, individuals can join communities that reflect their beliefs and leave those that do not. Alternatively to this analysis of Eggers's utopian novels, several studies have proposed a Foucauldian or simply postmodernist perspective on digital surveillance.

## The Implications of Algorithms: Digital Surveillance and Numerification of Individuals

The assumption is that in the past Big Brother was watching and in the present corporatocracy is watching. In general, in dystopian societies, surveillance is normalized as a foundational element of power, positioning privacy as a hindrance to authority. These novels effectively illustrate the future impact of constant mass surveillance, the complete digitalization of daily life, and the quantification of every aspect of life (Maurer and Rostbøll 2020, 1–20).

In 1791, the philosopher and jurist Jeremy Bentham (1995) proposed a jail, intended also for hospitals, asylums, and schools, called the panopticon. This term, meaning literally "everything that can be seen," derives from the mythological Greek figure of Argus Panoptes, a giant with hundreds of eyes who served as a watchful guardian. He could sleep by closing some of his eyes while others remained open to continue watching. The fundamental principle of the panopticon is that the observer can see everything, whereas the observed cannot see the observer. This situation creates a dynamic where the observed becomes an object rather than a subject; thereby, the very same structure promotes self-regulation and self-control. According to Michel Foucault (1975), in the panopticon, authority is visible but unverifiable; that is, the power is impersonal because of the inability to attribute a face to the authority. Therefore, the identity of the one who operates the mechanisms of control is irrelevant. In this sense, the panopticon represents

power reduced to its ideal form, serving as a metaphor for invisible and, at the same time, omnipresent authority. The efficiency is due to the internalization of discipline within the minds of individuals, permitted by the unequal visibility. Individuals are less inclined to transgress laws when aware of being observed, even if surveillance is not continuously practiced. Under this lens, in modern society, the pervasive use of technology, the digital realm, and social media cultivate a culture of discipline through surveillance. The Foucauldian theory about punishing and surveillance illustrates how surveillance functions as a mechanism of social control, portraying individuals as gradually becoming desensitized to perpetual monitoring and eventually accepting it as standard practice (İşık 2020, 154–62).

Two other authors who have suggested an analysis of digital surveillance are Randolph Lewis and Thomas Mathiesen. Lewis (2017) applies the term "panopticon" to the mass surveillance of corporations that collect personal information given voluntarily for convenience or fun. Mathiesen (1997) discusses the transformation of the panoptic model into the "synopticon," in which the many control the few. This concept is particularly relevant to the modern era of mass media and social media, which enables large numbers of people to observe and monitor the actions of a few individuals, often public figures like politicians, celebrities, and famous personalities. In the synopticon, the power of surveillance is distributed among the general population so it is decentralized. The synopticon is shaped by voyeurism: the actions of public figures are subject to the judgment of the masses, who search for accountability and apply social pressure. Public visibility becomes a means of social control with this constant feedback process.

In order to understand the impact of this new typology of surveillance, the new dogma of social transparency has to be taken into account. This ethics of the Circle seeks to transcend the panoptic model through a synoptic approach enabled by digital architecture; this framework confines individuals within a state of perpetual observation by others. As stated in the novel, "under the guise of having every voice heard, you create mob rule, a filterless society where secrets are crimes" (Eggers 2013, 483). Eggers, just like Zamjatin, depicts a place where everything is made out of glass: desks, walls, doors, ceilings, and "the Glass Eatery" (15). The transparent architecture of the company represents the aesthetic of the totalitarian transparency policy. Even the widespread use of Lycra and chromatic conformity of clothing denotes the loss of individuality (Yangchen and Inbaraj 2024). In the "digital panopticon," transparency is guaranteed by "exhibitionism," "voyeurism," and "hypercommunication" (Han 2015, 46)—that is, "decidedly post-Orwellian" (Schleusener 2018, 194). The promise of transparency in *The Circle* is to lead to the utopian dream of "a perfect society free of violence, crime, and political corruption" (192); whereas, according to Hannah Arendt

(1998), the overlap between the public and private spheres is a typical characteristic of totalitarianism and has negative effects on individual freedom and the health of political life.

An equally significant interpretation is "the society of transparency" of Byung Chul Han (2015, 1), in which "everything is measured by its exhibition value" (11). As evidence, in *The Circle*, the omission of her kayak hobby on Mae's profile and her decision to hide her solo kayaking is read as theft. In particular, the pendant microcamera SeeChange (Eggers 2021, 69) in *The Every* has become a "portable panopticon" (Marks 2015, 164), representing the ultimate liberation of humanity from privacy. SeeChange is shaping a new way of existing: constant voluntary streaming to a worldwide audience with a tiny, cheap, easy-to-install, and easy-to-use device. The assumption is that privacy is theft because "knowledge" and "equal access to all possible human experiences" (Eggers 2013, 301) are basic human rights. Doing something by yourself is "stealing" experiences from older, indigent, or disabled individuals, according to Gunner, the son of Bailey, who was born with cerebral palsy.

In these novels, technological mass surveillance also takes another form called social, lateral (Andrejevic 2004, 481), or participatory (Albrechtslund 2008) surveillance. Hence, the surveillance gazes are that of the company as well as the one internalized by individuals, who are, at the same time, watching subjects and watched objects. The central point is that, nowadays, "the entire globe is . . . a panopticon" because it is digital and "the prisoner . . . is a perpetrator and a victim at the same time" (Han 2015, 49). The consequence is that the audience watching is "the big Other" (Andrejevic 2004, 486), not Big Brother anymore. But the panopticon is still in effect because watching each other is always watching ourselves. Mass surveillance is possible thanks to the total digitalization of human life, projected in *The Circle* and completely realized in *The Every*.

The revolutionary tool for the "ultimate transparency" is SeeChange, a microscopic "waterproof, sand-proof, windproof, animal-proof, insect-proof, everything-proof" camera (Eggers 2013, 62), a "microscopic chip" (343) and a "bracelet" (153) monitoring health. Employees are surveilled with CircleSearch (96), children with ChildTrack (86)—along with Takes a Village, or Tav, for filming evidence of child abuse (Eggers 2021, 116)—and criminals through SeeYou (Eggers 2013, 419), developed by KnowThem (Eggers 2021, 240). "Invisible . . . fingerprint ink" is also used (Eggers 2013, 41). This technology is ethically problematic due to its violation of privacy, the presumption of innocence, the potential for discrimination, and the potential abuse of power. In addition to people identifiers such as SoulSearch (445) and "facial rec" (170) for Neighbor Watch (421), there is Homie (259), which scans every product in someone's house. Other apps depicting a social context not only without privacy but also without freedom of choice include the following: Kerpow!, which forces spontaneity; Thinking of You, which

sends "a T.O.Y., or toy—to each of user's contacts, twice a day" (Eggers 2021, 116); Departy, which notifies you about the death of anyone in your network, tells you to whom you should send condolences, helps you write those condolences with DepartyElite, and connects you with florists through DepartyPlus; the mandatory new digital currency CircleMoney (Eggers 2013, 172); the personal organizer called HelpMe, which includes a calendar, reminders, and diet meals (Eggers 2021, 41); and ShouldEye, which provides public help in making any decision (117). The dystopian idea of this last app can be linked to the "demoktesis" of Robert Nozick (1974, 276); in the novels, freedom of choice is considered "the burden of our time and the root of most planetary malaise" (Eggers 2013, 91).

Dave Eggers shows how freedom of speech is distorted in the realm of social media because it is no longer solely an individual right but is manipulated into a rhetorical device that serves the company's interests. This manipulation allows the company to justify its extensive data collection practices, ostensibly for the benefit of society, while in reality exploiting individual citizens as users (McKenna 2023, 87–115). Surveillance occurs through free smart speakers called HereMe (Eggers 2021, 258) to prevent child and domestic abuse, similarly to Alexa, Google Home, and Siri. Despite a lot of initial lies about it, the smart speakers in the novel are "listening all the time, or could listen all the time" (195) to every conversation in every user's private home, and "10,000 humans" (196) listen to those conversations under the justification of improving and optimizing the software and the services of the company. When the Every creates the next generation of these devices, with Hear Me as a code word, "privacy was not promised or expected," nor is freedom of speech in the private realm. In this sense, "the right to privacy and the right to remain silent are eroded by the structure of social media platforms" (McKenna 2023, 92).

Individual value is quantified by the action of the "zing,"—which involves giving "a smile or a frown" (Eggers 2013, 50)—students' final scores on YouthRank (339), and the Participation Rank or PartiRank (100). This Popularity Rank (Wrobel 2023, 100) consists of rating on a five-point scale every individual as a member of the social community. Participation is an object of observation and measurement, representing the predominance of the "homo numerus" (6). Everything in human life can be quantified: beauty, quality, and relevance of a piece of art with Hermosa (Eggers 2021, 168); physical beauty with FaceIt (266), which becomes "Friendy . . . a lie detector test" (162); love with Show Your Love (116); friendship with AuthentiFriend (34); happiness with HappyNow?; orgasms with Did I?; meals with Satisfied? (115); parenting with WereThey?; and hobbies with PassionProject (116). This process of "numerification" (Wrobel 2023, 6), or "the datafication of society" (15), which is intended to create a new type of human, generates widespread apathy. The meaning of life in the novels is living online "to be seen," to have "proof" (Eggers 2013, 485) of personal existence by tracking

one's life on OwnSelf (41) as a part of social media. The transparency policy is a mission and a cult with no boundaries, characterized by social exposure due to the need for approval, recognition, and gratification. Validation, acceptance, and power in *The Circle* become an obsession for Mae to ensure her place in the company and her existence in society as a human being.

## The Deep Connection among Surveillance, Conformity, and Shame

Surveillance is seen as a moral regulator, aligning with Bentham's panoptic concept, and Betiel Wasihun (2018) has summarized the premise of these as "no privacy, no shame" (8)—constant surveillance brings transparency, which should eliminate shame. Nevertheless, it is important to add to this perspective that the corporation's goal is total control of individuals, and by demonizing and depriving people of privacy, it can use social shame or "public shaming" (2) as a tool for manipulation and demand "digital self-exposure" (3) in the name of transparency. In these novels, shame is used as a threat, serving as the principal mechanism of social control, instead of the physical violence typical of totalitarianism (Terentowicz-Fotyga 2024, 1–12). In this regard, "self-surveillance" (Schleusener 2018, 193) and techno-conformism are part of the "'participatory panopticon'" (197) characterized by "'dataveillance'" (Wasihun 2018, 6) and induced by social shame or "cyberhumiliation" (Scheff and Schorr 2017, 28).

Hannah Arendt (1973) describes the mass society of the twentieth century, in which individuals are drowned, as fertile ground for totalitarianism stemming from nationalism. She identifies conformity as the modern equality characteristic of mass society, by which individuals lose themselves in normalcy. She criticizes the depersonalizing trend toward passive homogenization and the lack of critical judgment that goes with it. For Arendt, pluralism, polyphony, and dialogue were essential, not unity. In dystopian literature, the decentralization of the individual and the flattening of individual personality are depicted as vulnerabilities of society. Typically, the protagonist experiences an identity crisis and, spurred by internal or external pressures, becomes a nonconformist. Uniformity, as an extreme manifestation of the principle of equality in dystopias, is imposed on the citizenry through a series of norms. As stated in the novel, "characters conform to societal norms, modify behavior, or self-censor in response to the omnipresent gaze of 'the Every'" (Yangchen and Inbaraj 2024, 76).

In this novel, there are instruments like "eye-tracking" (Eggers 2021, 174) for "eyeshame" (176) and "fruitskam" for accusing every person eating "fruit not grown in California" of being "guilty" (100). Notably, "sham" is a neologism mixing "samaritan and shame" to identify posts online "exposing swervy drivers, loud gym grunters, Louvre line-cutters, single-use-plastic-users, and blithe allowers of infants-crying-in-public" (14). The problematic

consequence is having a high level of the Shame Aggregate, a tool the corporation uses to control individuals. The company uses "surveillance, data, and shame as behavioral modifiers" (114) and "internet's currency" (176).

The so-called phenomenon of cancel culture has two implications: on one hand, exposing individuals for their past comments or behavior with severe repercussions in the present for their jobs and social life; on the other hand, erasing authors of the past for racism, misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia—that is, what the libertarian feminist Camille Paglia (2017) calls the red pen attitude. In these novels, there are two examples of cancel culture: the app PastPerfect (Eggers 2013, 407) for investigating personal history, with which Mae's best friend Annie discovers her slaveholder family's past and goes into a coma; and the app FictFix (Eggers 2021, 117), which changes old novels to reflect contemporary standards. The civil libertarian Nadine Strossen (2020) clarifies that it is legitimate under the First Amendment to choose words carefully or to avoid some words. However, she underlines, the problem lies in the widespread belief that cancel culture is preferable to offending, that it is a good way of educating society, that the legal principle of rehabilitation is unjust, and that it results in an ethical society that, with private censorship, "can silence or punish our words and induce self-censorship, as effectively as the government could, if not more" (8). In effect, the corporation of these novels is similar to the ethic state, forcing citizens to conform through social shame while erasing "the opportunity for redemption" (Yangchen and Inbaraj 2024, 75). The perfect example is the app Enlightened Traveler (Eggers 2021, 71), used to educate individuals about environmentalism—which has been transformed by the Individual Carbon Impact or Personal Carbon Impact (114)—and force employees to live on the campus and to survive on finger food. As explained in *The Circle*, "there can be one morality, one set of rules" (Eggers 2013, 395).

In conclusion, the "tyrannical monopoly" (Wasihun 2018, 7) of the Every, with its threat of public shame to force conformity, causes feelings such as "anxiety, fear, and suspicion" (2), leading to a high rate of suicides on the campus. It is fundamental to keep in mind that conformity and control over individuals are also made effective through the manipulation of language. In general, the dystopian language, as the interconnected language in and of dystopia, can be identified as "antilanguages" (Norledge 2022, 49), characterized by "cognitive estrangement" to stimulate "emotive responses" (56). "The Orwellian resonances" (Jarvis 2019, 276) in these novels are a normalization of mass surveillance with "a digital panopticon" (281), induced techno-conformism, desire for human perfection, and slogans. Clearly, the official motto of the Circle ("Secrets Are Lies; Sharing Is Caring; Privacy Is Theft" [Eggers 2013, 326]) recalls the Orwellian one, "War Is Peace / Freedom Is Slavery / Ignorance Is Strength" (Orwell 2013, 5). In these novels, the use of prescriptive language with neologisms to spread orthodoxy refers to the Orwellian "newspeak."

Dave Eggers coins several terms to reflect the ideology and goals of the company but also a closing world, while representing the evolution of language as going hand in hand with the development of the company from *The Every* to *The Circle*. This closed and protected world is described by terms such as Circlers (Eggers 2013, 23) and Everypersons (Eggers 2021, 119), to identify members of the community of the company, or "circly" (Eggers 2013, 113) and "everypropriate" (Eggers 2021, 95), meaning something typical of the company. Additionally, there is a linguistic dichotomy representing the closed ecosystem of the company in the decision to call the campus "Everywhere . . . and anything not on campus is Nowhere" (115). The message for individuals is that there are no lives or masterminds outside of the campus, and this is reinforced by the use of terms like "Inner and Outer Circle" (Eggers 2013, 99) and "the Gang of 40" (Eggers 2021, 62). The new language discriminates against individuals who are not already or not at all embracing the ideology of the company with dismissive terms such as Newbies (Eggers 2013, 60) for new employees and CircleJerk (261) for technophobes. In these novels, there are also numerous inventions with seemingly harmless names that claim to benefit individuals while they take away privacy and the freedom to control all information and thereby hold all the power (López Rúa 2019, 117–36).

## The Dystopian Governmentality and Its Digital Totalitarianism

The Circle is "a corporation aiming to rule society" (McKenna 2023, 88), while the Every is already doing that, and this is why these novels can be considered "a kind of reloaded version of George Orwell's *1984* for the digital age" (Maurer and Rostbøll 2020, 1). For the Circle, the utopian goal, with its Rousseauian flavor, is to improve "active" (López Rúa 2019, 129) and "direct democracy" (Eggers 2013, 400) through Demoxie (396). Thus, a private company has planned to implement a technology to exercise totalitarian control by managing all private information and limiting individual freedom, which will force people to vote. Demoxie, the e-democracy or digital democracy, recalls Moxie, the name of an American cream soda beverage from 1876, later used as a slang expression meaning determination, initiative, or aggressive energy. The company technology integrates the voting process within their platform "TruYou—unbendable and unmaskable" (21). Digital citizenship is mandatory because the failure to vote results in the user's profile being blocked, which consequently restricts access to social security, tax services, email, and social media—a way to have "100 percent of the citizenry" (391). This platform enables instantaneous decision-making with "instant and clear and verifiable data" (391) and no institutional mediation. As explained in the novel, "with TruYou, to set up a profile, you have to be a real person, with a real address, complete personal info, a real Social Security number, and a real and verifiable date of birth. In other words, all the

information the government traditionally wants when you register to vote," but the company also admits to having "far more information" (385) than the state.

The dystopian novel clarifies that there are no more "false identities, identity theft, multiple user names, complicated passwords, and payment systems" because there is now just "one button, one account, everything tied together and trackable and simple, all of it operable via mobile or laptop, tablet or retinal" (21). Therefore, there is also no more freedom, no more privacy, and no more human error. Specifically, there is the possibility of identifying "three . . . dimensions of Demoxie: energy, transparency, and voting" (Maurer and Rostbøll 2020, 6). Firstly, the Circle wants to revitalize the democratic processes through acceleration and simplification. Secondly, its mission of full transparency, along with the request of accountability from politicians wearing SeeChange, leads to a "direct, aggregative democracy, with . . . no need for representatives" (6). Politicians who wanted "to go clear" (Eggers 2013, 325) rise in the polls, and the ones who wanted "TO BREAK UP THE CIRCLE" (173), like Senator Williamson, are investigated for ethical violations linked to incriminating files on their personal computers placed there by the company. As another example, after the presidential candidate Senator Tom Goleta—who is a threat to the Every for refusing to wear the mandatory SeeChange—is invited to give a speech at the Every, he disappears from the presidential race because the company uses eye-tracking technology to derail his career (Eggers 2021). Thirdly, they replace the representative democracy in order to manage completely the democratic vote through their "internet-based democracy" (Maurer and Rostbøll 2020, 13). For instance, the Every succeeds in embodying "a version of digital centralization that, while privately held, nevertheless functions like a state or, more accurately, an international private governmentality" (Rectenwald 2019, 41). This refers to today's "system of Big Digital," called also "'the Google Archipelago'" (42).

The postmodern term *governmentality*, coined by Foucault (2007), identifies the distribution of power from the state to the population, which enables people to govern themselves by internalizing the state's mentality. Michael Rectenwald (2019) modifies this neologism to include the governmentalization of private subjects using a corporate ideology "intrinsic to the technology, and produced by it" (41), as in the case of the Every. Governmentality is seen in the description of the role of Stenton in the novel, who "professionalized . . . idealism, monetized . . . utopia," and truly understands the connection between "work and politics, and between politics and control. Public-private leads to private-private, and soon you have the Circle running most or even all government services . . . . Everyone becomes a citizen of the Circle" (Eggers 2013, 484).

The campus in these novels—suggesting Disneyland, Apple Park, and Googleplex (Jarvis 2019, 275–93)—is a system similar to "a feudalism in which employees are housed within land owned by the corporation" (Eve and Street 2018, 84–85), creating "an economic dependence in which the boundaries between free time and work are erased" (85). The metaphor of closing the Circle recalls the virtues of "Googliness." It is a cautionary warning about the problematics of contemporary society in a worst-case scenario. When the Circle encompasses everything with a "process of monopolization" (Schleusener 2018, 191), it absorbs and dominates all private and political activity. The private company becomes the only institution governing society, using a "soft" (Jarvis 2019, 276) digital totalitarianism or cyber-totalitarianism that represents "a classic extra twist of contemporaneity typical of the genre" (Beckman 2020, 540).

## The Implications of Transhumanism behind the Process of Dehumanization: A Conclusion

The utopian dream in the novels is to use the process of dehumanization to create a new perfect human being, recalling the typical technological positivism of the Californian "techno-utopia" (Laguarta Bueno 2018, 174), "promoted . . . as a modern-day eutopia" (Marks 2015, 162). These "Silicon Valley novels" (Eve and Street 2018, 93) contain plenty of satire regarding the "celebration of transhumanist values" (Laguarta Bueno 2018, 173). They underline the neutrality of technology but not its possible future use toward various pervasive and harmful developments in society.

The term transhumanism was coined by Julian Huxley (1957), the brother of the novelist Aldous Huxley. It refers to a growing cultural movement that presupposes the moral duty to enhance the physical and cognitive abilities of the human species through new technologies associated with posthumanism, as well as to the desire to entirely surpass the human species and break the Western dichotomy between nature and culture. The Übermensch of Friedrich Nietzsche, in this vision, would be a new human being who aspires to self-transcend through technology. Thus, the intrinsic theoretical premise of transhumanism, already in its early stages in the 1980s, is the concept of improvement understood as the overcoming of the human being through the thaumaturgic power of machines. So, dehumanization is not only the deprivation of the freedom to choose but also the utopian perspective that "improving the human condition" is "reasonable" or "appealing" (Laguarta Bueno 2018, 184).

As illustrated in *The Circle*, "there used to be the option of opting out. But now that's over. Completion is the end. We're closing the Circle around everyone—it's a totalitarian nightmare" (Eggers 2013, 481). The transcendence of humanity via technological means, as shown in the novels, can be "a nightmare" (Laguarta Bueno 2018, 184) for the centralization of power in the hands of technological and governmental elites, which might use

such technologies to control and monitor the population, limiting individual freedom through social or economic pressure to adopt technologies that are not genuinely desired but, like transparency and sociability, become compulsory and compulsive (Rectenwald 2023). The dehumanization in these novels occurs in different ways: the reduction of people to numbers and scores; communication through zings, smiles, and frowns; and narcissism, omnipotence, apathy, and lack of empathy as a loss of humanist values. The embodiment of this kind of "digital magic" (Nicoli 2015, 47)—the spiritual dimension given, for example, to "Three Wise Men" (Eggers 2013, 277) and the "visionaries" presenting every new idea at the "Dream Friday" (60)—is called "technologism" or "the religion of technology" (Dinello 2006, 18), in which "techno-faith" promotes individual perfection and "we end up oppressed by our inventions" (274). As underlined in *The Circle*, there is an eschatological dimension of surveillance: "Now we're all God. Every one of us will soon be able to see, and cast judgment upon, every other. We'll see what He sees. We'll articulate His judgment. We'll channel His wrath and deliver His forgiveness. On a constant and global level. All religion has been waiting for this, when every human is a direct and immediate messenger of God's will" (Eggers 2013, 395).

To conclude, this paper emphasizes how, in this nonstate digital totalitarianism, human perfection implemented by neutral and advanced technology is an excuse to surveil individuals to try to improve blind conformity, such as through the fear of being shamed publicly. Digital dystopias attempt to respond to future scenarios that are not entirely improbable because humanity continues to follow the Baconian principle of understanding through construction. While techno-utopianism and techno-dystopianism can be framed as contrasting optimistic and pessimistic outlooks on technological progress (Dai and Hao 2018), this study aims to assert that technology is inherently neutral. However, its application invariably carries political and ethical implications shaped by the intentions and actions of those who wield it. Moreover, the unperceived neutrality of technology underscores its capacity for both liberating and oppressive ends, depending on the sociopolitical context and the power structures in place. Understanding this complexity has required the examination of how technological advancements intersect with societal norms (conformity and shame), regulatory frameworks (digital totalitarianism or cyber-totalitarianism with digital surveillance, lateral or participatory surveillance, and self-surveillance), and economic imperatives (digitalization and datafication or numerification of society). These intersections are forming dystopias with regard to ethics, freedom, and justice in the digital era, illuminating the multifaceted impacts and implementations of technological innovations on individuals and societies globally.

Submitted: October 06, 2024 CST. Accepted: November 12, 2024 CST. Published: January 04, 2025 CST.

## REFERENCES


Albrechtslund, Anders. 2008. "Online Social Networking as Participatory Surveillance." *First Monday* 13 (3): e2142. https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v13i3.2142.

Andrejevic, Mark. 2004. "The Work of Watching One Another: Lateral Surveillance, Risk, and Governance." *Surveillance and Society* 2 (4): 479–97. https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v2i4.3359.

Arendt, Hannah. 1973. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

———. 1998. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Atwood, Margaret. 2013. "When Privacy Is Theft." Review of *The Circle*, by Dave Eggers. *New York Review of Books*, November 21, 2013. https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2013/11/21/eggers-circle-when-privacy-is-theft/.

Beckman, Frida. 2020. "Control and the Novel: Dave Eggers and Disciplinary Form." *Modern Fiction Studies* 66 (3): 527–46. https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2020.0024.

Bentham, Jeremy. 1995. *The Panopticon Writings*. London: Verso.

Dai, Yu-Xiao, and Su-Tong Hao. 2018. "Transcending the Opposition between Techno-utopianism and Techno-dystopianism." *Technology in Society* 53:9–13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2017.11.001.

Dinello, Daniel. 2006. *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Eggers, Dave. 2013. *The Circle*. London: Hamish Hamilton.

———. 2021. *The Every*. New York: Vintage.

Eve, Martin Paul, and Joe Street. 2018. "The Silicon Valley Novel." *Literature and History* 27 (1): 81–97. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306197318755680.

Foucault, Michel. 1975. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*. London: Penguin.

———. 2007. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Han, Byung-Chul. 2015. *The Transparency Society*. Translated by Erik Butler. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

Herman, Peter C. 2018. "More, Huxley, Eggers, and the Utopian/Dystopian Tradition." *Renaissance and Reformation* 41 (3): 165–93. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26604117.

Huxley, Julian. 1957. "Transhumanism." In *New Bottles for New Wine*, 13–17. London: Chatto and Windus.

İşık, Derya. 2020. "A Foucauldian Reading of Dave Eggers's *The Circle*." *Journal of Modernism and Postmodernism Studies* 1 (2): 154–62. https://doi.org/10.47333/modernizm.2020265884.

Jarvis, Brian. 2019. "Surveillance and Spectacle inside *The Circle*." In *Surveillance, Architecture and Control: Discourses on Spatial Culture*, edited by Susan Flynn and Antonia Mackay, 275–93. Cham, Swtz.: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-00371-5_14.

Laguarta Bueno, Carmen. 2018. "Transhumanism in Dave Eggers's *The Circle*: Utopia vs. Dystopia, Dream vs. Nightmare." *Revista de estudios norteamericanos*, no. 22, 165–88. https://revistascientificas.us.es/index.php/estudios_norteamericanos/article/view/10506.

Lewis, Randolph. 2017. *Under Surveillance: Being Watched in Modern America*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

López Rúa, Paula. 2019. "VPS, Goodthink, Unwomen and Demoxie: Morphological Neologism in Four Dystopian Novels / SPV, bienpensar, no-mujeres y Demoxie: Neologismos morfológicos en cuatro novelas distópicas." *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies* 59:117–36. https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.20196342.

Marks, Peter. 2015. *Imagining Surveillance: Eutopian and Dystopian Literature and Film*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474400190.001.0001.

Mathiesen, Thomas. 1997. "The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault's 'Panopticon' Revisited." *Theoretical Criminology* 1 (2): 215–34. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480697001002003.

Maurer, Kathrin, and Christian F. Rostbøll. 2020. "Demoxie: Reflections on Digital Democracy in Dave Eggers' Novel *The Circle*." *First Monday* 25 (5): e10650. https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i5.10650.

McKenna, Peter J., III. 2023. "Meet the New Boss: Dave Eggers's *The Circle* and the New Digital Totalitarianism." *College Literature* 50 (1): 87–115. https://doi.org/10.1353/lit.2023.0004.

Nicoli, Luca. 2015. "The Seduction of Digital Magic." In *Psychoanalysis Online 2: Impact of Technology on Development, Training, and Therapy*, edited by Jill Savege Scharff, 29–37. London: Karnac. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429478840-3.

Norledge, Jessica. 2022. *The Language of Dystopia*. Cham, Swtz.: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-93103-2.

Nozick, Robert. 1974. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Orwell, George. 2013. *1984*. New York: HarperCollins.

Paglia, Camille. 2017. "Modern Times: Camille Paglia and Jordan B. Peterson" Interview by Jordan B. Peterson. Video, 1:42:47. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-hIVnmUdXM.

Popper, Karl. 2002. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203538111.

Rectenwald, Michael. 2019. *Google Archipelago: The Digital Gulag and the Simulation of Freedom*. London: New English Review Press.

———. 2023. *The Great Reset and the Struggle for Liberty: Unraveling the Global Agenda*. London: New English Review Press.

Sadeeq, Shaaban Sulaiman. 2024. "Navigating the Boundaries of Human Identity and Artificial Intelligence in Contemporary Literature." *Qalaai Zanist Journal* 9 (1): 1385–406. https://doi.org/10.25212/lfu.qzj.9.1.48.

Scheff, Sue, and Melissa Schorr. 2017. *Shame Nation: The Global Epidemic of Online Hate*. Naperville, Ill.: Sourcebooks.

Schleusener, Simon. 2018. "The Surveillance Nexus: Digital Culture and the Society of Control." *Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 34 (1): 175–201.

Strossen, Nadine. 2020. *Resisting Cancel Culture: Promoting Dialogue, Debate, and Free Speech in the College Classroom*. Perspectives on Higher Education. Washington, D.C.: American Council of Trustees and Alumni.

Terentowicz-Fotyga, Urszula. 2024. "Do It Yourself Dystopia: The Digital Future in Dave Eggers's *The Every*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, February. https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2024.2311740.

Uhlenbruch, Frauke. 2015. *The Nowhere Bible: Utopia, Dystopia, Science Fiction*. Berlin: De Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110414172.

Wasihun, Betiel. 2018. "Surveillance and Shame in Dave Eggers's *The Circle*." *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture*, no. 6, e1150. https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2018.1150.

Wrobel, Claire. 2023. "Brave New Humans and Incongruous Bodysuits: On Surveillance and Its Modes in Dave Eggers' *The Every*." *L'atelier* 14 (2): e04230761. https://hal.sorbonne-universite.fr/hal-04230761v1.

Yangchen, Tenzin, and M. Inbaraj. 2024. "Imminent Dystopia: Pseudo Identity and Surveillance in Dave Eggers's *The Every*." *Literary Herald* 9 (6): 70–78.

Zeb, Alam, Raul G. Moldez, Takako Kawabata, Ausima Sultan, and Kashif Lodhi. 2023. "Dystopian Literature in the 21st Century: Themes, Trends and Sociopolitical Reflections." *Harf-o-Sukhan* 7 (4): 77–86.