

An Intimate Look at the Rise of Data Totalitarianism

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Dave Eggers, [The Circle](#), Vintage Books (2014).

One of the greatest challenges faced by cyber scholars and policymakers is how to predict the undesired social consequences of technological developments and to design the best policies to address them. Digital technology makes this challenge even harder: change is swift and getting swifter, and is often formulated in technical terms.

This is where legal scholarship and policymaking could benefit from a novel. [The Circle](#) by [Dave Eggers](#) is a dystopian novel about the digital era. Many legal scholars have written over the past decade on the [surveillance society](#), [big data](#), [contextual privacy](#), the right to [privacy](#), [the right to be forgotten](#), [transparency and accountability](#). However, the analysis of these issues in the legal literature remains abstract. The Circle offers a mirror image of our daily digital experiences, helping us to imagine what it would be like to live in a society of total transparency, and to experience the gradual loss of autonomy. The Circle tells a story about the human condition in the info era, the ideology of the digital culture, and the political structure which serves it. It could help us see in real time the social implications of digital technology, identify the forces that come into play, and design more concrete strategies to address them.

The book tells the story of Mae Holland, a young middle-class woman, who has accepted a coveted position at the digital corporation—The Circle. The Circle is everything you might expect of a typical multinational internet company, such as Facebook, Google or Twitter: young, innovative, professional, and exciting. Mae is drawn into the work and social life at The Circle which quickly becomes her entire world. It takes over her relationships with her parents, friends and lovers, as the outside world fades around her. Like her fellow employees, she becomes a living example of the services, the life style and the values that the Circle generates, and eventually becomes an object of the service she provides.

Life in the data cloud involves ongoing quantification, subsequent objectification, and a loss of space for intimacy. Mae quickly discovers that *customer service* is only a small part of her work, while *participation* in the community, or more precisely, *sharing* with the community, is the bulk of her job. She disposes of everything that is private: her personal correspondence, her intimate photos, her health condition, her father's deteriorating medical situation, her hobbies, her friends, her lovers—all become public in real time. This process comes to a head when a permanent collar cam is installed, recording and broadcasting everything that she encounters. That is how Mae, and everyone around her, become stars in an online reality show.

The story of Mae's integration into The Circle is in many ways the story of our ongoing adjustment to digital life. Why do we give up our privacy every time we share pictures on Instagram, update our status on Facebook and enable location services? [Studies show](#) that people are willing to provide their personal data for even a small discount, failing to conceive the long-term negative consequences.

The dystopia of The Circle points to another reason: *the ideology of sharing*. As Fordism worshiped efficiency, the digital ideology worships the sharing of information. *Transparency* and *sharing* are not simply a by-product of surveillance cameras or social media: they are the cornerstone of the digital

economy where data is the primary mover.

This ideology includes a social vision and a moral code. Sharing data embodies a new social order and hope for redemption through technological innovation. If we only had enough data, and sufficient processing power to analyze it, we could predict the outbreak of diseases and take measures to reduce the risks. Presumably, perfect information could offer a technological answer to the biggest challenges of humanity: health crises, climate impacts, crime, family violence, and even government corruption.

But perfect information requires participation and full transparency on the part of everyone. Sharing information therefore becomes a civil obligation and an ethical imperative. It is a moral duty to share everything with everyone, without exception and with no compromises. The slogans at The Circle declare “Privacy is theft,” “Secrets are lies,” “Sharing is caring.” Failure to share is regarded as selfish, inconsiderate and antisocial.

Individual preferences of privacy do not really matter as the *ideology of sharing* is not individualistic. At its core is the *networked individual*, who connects with others to produce economic value, political power and the wisdom of the masses. The sharing ideology strives for unity: the network merges with the person, and individuals converge via the algorithm.

The totalitarianism of sharing is perhaps the most fascinating phenomenon of our era. Full transparency makes for built-in policing: everyone oversees everyone else. The new social order makes it difficult for the individual to act autonomously. Fearing the supervisor, the political leader, or the crowd, the *networked individuals* are doomed to comply—naturally at the expense of autonomy and the ability to make free choices.

The human condition in the digital era is subject to constant surveillance, by governments, corporations and peers. The ideology of sharing, and the economic forces that drive it, make transparency a powerful measure of governance. This may give rise to a real threat to the constitutional structure of western democracies.

The social implications of technological changes are difficult grasp. The well-known [Collingridge dilemma of control](#) explains:

The social consequences of a technology cannot be predicted early in the life of the technology. By the time undesirable consequences are discovered, however, the technology is often so much part of the whole economics and social fabric that its control is extremely difficult.

The Circle offers an intimate look into these processes. A better understanding of the social implications of digital technology could help us identify the choices we have, and ensure that the technologies we design, and the policies that shape their use, will secure the rights and capabilities of individuals as autonomous subjects.

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