The Dangers of an All-Knowing Society: *The Circle* by Dave Eggers

In his 2013 novel *The Circle*, Dave Eggers explores a frighteningly relevant potential future of our society as a fully transparent, media-saturated place. The world of the novel can be described as a “technotopia,” defined by Gorman Beauchamp as “an advanced totalitarian state dependent upon a massive technological apparatus” (54). The narrative reveals the blinders that power and prestige can have on members of society under a utopian-like, highly technological state. At multiple points throughout the novel, the value of limitless information and knowledge is questioned, and in these moments, we see characters beginning to break through the veil that the Circle, a powerful and influential Internet corporation, has draped over their society in an attempt to curb critiques of their ideology. Despite the Circle’s desire for an omniscient society, these moments illustrate the dangers posed by knowing too much — the implications of an endless, unquenchable pursuit of knowledge, the limitations of the human psyche to comprehend that constant stream of information, and the certain truths of which we are simply undeniably happier staying ignorant. Finding a comfortable balance between the exercise of power that knowledge grants and the pleasures of timely ignorance is a pursuit that the Circle as a whole fails to see the value in. In life, however, what may genuinely help us to reach contentment and satisfaction is our acceptance that there are reasonable limits to our ability to know, and that those limits are in place to help, not to hinder.
In the novel, the Circle prides itself on its endless hunt for knowledge; the company’s advanced technology furthers their ability to essentially collect whatever information they please, and this fosters a sense of entitlement to data. They operate by the proclamation that “[k]nowledge is property and no one can own it” (Eggers 489), but this unfortunately leads Circlers to feel that it is their mission to pursue all knowledge that the world supposedly “owes” them. The line between the curiosity to learn and the demand to know is one that Circlers cross with nearly every project, and their technology allows them to embark on a tireless journey to drain the world of its secrets. They seem to agree with Enlightenment thinkers that “[k]nowledge…could only contribute to happiness” (Lilla 67), though this is not the reality we see play out for the majority of the novel. An extreme example of the entitlement to knowledge is a goal of Stenton, one of the company’s three Wise Men, to count the grains of sand in the Sahara Desert. This endeavour is understood as “a show of strength” (Eggers 239), a goal undertaken only to show the extent of the Circle’s capabilities. Gorman Beauchamp, discussing the role of technology in dystopian novels, describes the way that these stories explore the possibility that, far beyond technology simply being used as “an instrument in the hands of the state's totalitarian rulers…to enforce a set of values extrinsic to the technology itself,” it becomes instead “an autonomous force that determines the values and thus shapes the society in its own image” (54). In the novel, Stenton fails to explain the application of the knowledge of his project, giving the impression that the power that knowledge grants him has “take[n] on an independent existence and will of its own” (Beauchamp 54) within him. Instead of a feeling of accomplishment given with the amount of knowledge he has earned, Stenton feels driven to gain more, because to the Circle, any opportunity to learn is a challenge to dig as deeply into that opportunity as one’s ability allows. Further, to do anything less than to share that new knowledge
would be considered selfish; failing to take up such an opportunity, and thus depriving the rest of humanity of one’s findings, is essentially “stealing from them” (Eggers 303). The growing mass of control the Circle holds proves that knowledge can provide ample social power, but tracing and collecting knowledge that is not useful quickly becomes exhaustive in terms of both the energy it takes to collect that information and in the continued effort to keep the record of findings. For example, the raw data of each person who goes “transparent” — the practice of keeping a body camera on their person for nearly every waking moment of their day, recording and broadcasting their every move (Eggers 210)— requires each identity to be stored in their own, personal, “enormous red metallic box, the size of a bus” (Eggers 221). The inconceivably huge amount of space, energy, and water used by such pieces of technology is overwhelming to Mae (Eggers 222), though she quickly comes to a degree of acceptance and complacency concerning the ability and power of the Circle, and she herself eventually chooses to go transparent as well.

Circlers quickly grow into a sense of entitlement, influenced by the powerful technology developed by the Circle to enable their pursuits. To demonstrate the extent of their reach, they promote the idea that “everything and everyone should be seen” (Eggers 490) and therefore everyone should be watched. They grow uncomfortable if there is even a small weak spot in their surveillance, and smoothly make up excuses for why their supervision in each situation is justified. For example, after Mae’s parents cover up the cameras placed in their home, the company claims that in order to give proper care to Mae’s father on their medical plan, they must be able to observe how his health is fairing at any given time; surveillance is the best way they see of doing this (Eggers 361). Even when their observation is nonconsensual, an excuse is made to find a way to justify their intrusion, such as when Eamon Bailey claims he “had no choice”
(Eggers 68) but to secretly place cameras in his mother’s house. Although she had refused beforehand to allow him to do this, he claims his intrusion of her privacy was justified for her own safety in her old age, and he puts the captured videos on display for all Circlers watching his demonstration without her knowledge (Eggers 69). The Circlers play at being in control of their technology, but their ambition for more knowledge, and more power, ultimately controls them (Beauchamp 54-55). In the end, Mae becomes entirely absorbed in their call for the freedom and transparency of information to the extent that even the inner-workings of Annie’s brain, inaccessible to Mae as she sits next to her comatose friend, are “an affront, a deprivation, to herself and to the world” (Eggers 497). Thankfully, the entitled attitude the Circlers have towards knowledge is not solely met with acceptance; Mercer refers to the Circlers’ need not only for their own information but everyone else’s as a “sickness” (Eggers 436), giving the impression that though they feel that their pursuit of knowledge strengthens their cause, there may be disadvantages which are not initially clear and are potentially disastrous.

Because the Circle greatly pursues knowledge for the power it provides them, its workers gain very little satisfaction and pleasure in new knowledge. Accompanying new information is the realization that there are always deeper levels yet to be considered, and with this, the Circlers experience a frustration with what they do not know, rather than feeling content with the knowledge they have managed to collect. Their mission for transparency takes away the right of individuals to privacy, even implying that any want for privacy is a show of having something to hide (Eggers 241). The “potentially dehumanizing and destructive effects” (Beauchamp 54) of technology lead the Circlers to see one another as vessels of knowledge rather than individuals; as a result, they tend to poach knowledge out of boredom rather than genuine curiosity to fill the void within themselves created by the awareness that the world is bigger than they will ever
likely know (Lilla 74), returning to the example of Stenton’s goal to count the grains of sand in the Sahara (Eggers 239). Through this initiative, Stenton embraces the Circle’s claim that human knowledge can and should be absolutely limitless — that under the Circle’s guidance and support, “no early question would remain unanswered” (Eggers 239). Like other Circlers, Stenton feels that his ability to pursue knowledge, regardless of its actual utility or “scientific benefit” (Eggers 239), is reason enough to dive into it as forcefully as the company’s technology allows. The Circle’s greed for a transparent society also holds them back from realizing that not everyone shares this drive for endless knowledge and openness, as Mae displays when she posts photos of Mercer’s work online without his permission and against his wishes (Eggers 258). The Circle’s endless ability to seize information indeed gives them an unbelievable amount of power to monitor and to control their growing community, but they are always hungry for more. They forget how to be satisfied with what they have, even for a moment, and seek to endlessly pursue whatever it is they feel they are still missing.

The Circle uses their power and their extensive technology in hope of eventually achieving an omniscient picture of the world. Through their SeeChange cameras, they have constant surveillance reaching nearly every corner of the globe, and their access is ever-expanding as their worldwide support grows. However, just because their technology has the capability to give people infinite access to nearly the entire world does not mean it provides individuals with the ability to process the constant stream of information, thus contributing to their staff’s vulnerability to overstimulation. The Circle expects the constant engagement and attention of its staff, rarely allowing them a moment away from screens and the public eye. Even on the weekends, though Mae is not working, she is expected to be “on campus,” interacting with other Circlers and constantly updating her online status about her whereabouts, what she is
doing, and what she is thinking about (Eggers 182). Being constantly watched, especially after
the company places cameras throughout campus, changes the Circlers’ behaviours, especially in
terms of their clothing choices, and Mae pays more attention to “where she scratch[es], when she
[blows] her nose and how” (Eggers 243); Nicole L. Wilson draws attention to two different
philosophies concerning surveillance — that of Michel Foucault, and of “celebrity studies”
(918). The Circle shares the celebrity studies view that “a viewed body is more powerful…[as]
the public viewing creates not a prison but a space for people to praise and encourage one
another” (Wilson 918). As we see from Mae’s example, the encouragement to go transparent
results in a flurry of support within the Circle and from her viewers, and she becomes a
permanent name in the “T2K” — the two thousand Circlers in the company’s top ranks in terms
of their media engagement and popularity (Eggers 193, 314). Although initially Mae shows signs
of uncertainty about the idea that she could be under surveillance at any time, by anyone, she
quickly comes to share the view of the Wise Men: the changes she makes to herself under
watchful eyes is “a good kind of calibration” (Eggers 243) that will ultimately lead to “a more
moral way of life” (Eggers 292).

Opposed to this view, Foucault’s ideas center around the idea of the watched bodies
becoming “docile or disciplined…creating a well-behaving society with limited need for
policing” (Wilson 918-20) and ultimately keeping up the imbalance of power between those
watching and those being watched. Though Mae feels guilty every time she keeps a secret from
her viewers, such as when she talks with Annie privately with her volume turned off (Eggers
446), the Circle’s opposition to any type of personal privacy does not stop her from occasionally
desiring it. She appears to be torn between these two opposing ideas of what surveillance means
in her life, and it becomes easier and safer for her to embrace the thinking of the Circle.
Unfortunately, she also develops a compulsive need to be watched as “proof” she exists (Eggers 490), as she never has the opportunity to put effort into her individuality and her life outside of the Circle’s feeds until she stops feeling the desire to do so.

The stress of overstimulation manifests as what Mae recurrently describes as a dark “tear” (Eggers 197). In moments of loneliness or quiet, when her work fails to fully capture her attention, Mae buckles under the exhaustion and weariness she feels in her work and in the demanding environment of the Circle. On a day-to-day basis, she is not afforded time to prioritize her personal mental health, often worrying about letting her anxiety and fatigue show through her expressions and actions on the cameras (Eggers 378). Instead of finding resolutions within herself, she idealizes and attempts to embody the dehumanized, Circle-manufactured version of herself: the “bright and fierce…indomitable version of herself” (Eggers 333) that prompts her through her headset. The tear represents her feelings of inadequacy at the company and in her life in general, and by aligning herself as closely as she can with the robotic, unflawed Mae the Circle created, she is able to somewhat get over these feelings. She admits that “we all know the world is too big for us to be significant…all we have is the hope of being seen, or heard, even for a moment” (Eggers 490), and this illustrates how vast the world made accessible by the Circle’s technology serves to make Mae, and likely other Circlers, feel small and inconsequential. They are led to attempt to fill that void created within them with more knowledge, but “the more [they know], the less [they are], and the less [they are], the less happy [they are]” (Lilla 74).

Overstimulation is clear in other characters, as well; for example, though Mercer is not directly or intentionally involved in the Circle’s world and business, he is dragged into the fray by Mae. He experiences firsthand the overwhelming power of the Circle when Mae demonstrates
SoulSearch, their technology to track down any individual in the world. Before Mae uses this technology to find Mercer, she expresses her frustration in the uncertainty of where he has disappeared to, thinking that “there was something very wrong when you couldn’t find someone you were trying to find” (Eggers 378), again displaying the sense of entitlement Circlers develop in regard to knowledge and others’ personal lives. Mae uses SoulSearch to find him, and his pursuers — those tuned into the demonstration — embody the feeling of overstimulation. They demand Mercer’s attention and push him quickly to a state of vulnerable fatigue, never offering him a moment to step back from, reflect on, or rationalize the situation (Eggers 458-65). His realization that there is no escape from the Circle’s growing power literally sends him off the edge (Eggers 466), illustrating the danger that the threat of overstimulation poses to Circlers and the average citizen alike. Mercer, like many others, prefers what Gregory Robson refers to as the “premodern” rather than “modern lifestyle” (75), filled with natural stimuli over the artificial, which promote a slower-pace, but still valid, daily path. Individuals like Mercer provide a necessary, grounding counterargument to the Circle’s monopoly, and his death implicates the dying world of the premodern and those who refuse to keep up with and bow to the overpowering influence of the modern.

Mae expresses her feeling that her anxiety from confrontation in her life is nothing compared to the stress induced by “not knowing the consequences, the future” (Eggers 196), and this leads her to gravitate toward the omniscience of the Circle. However, as Mercer claims in his final letter to Mae, the biggest threat that the Circle’s endless stream of information poses is that humans’ small brains can “only contain so much” (Eggers 434), and that perhaps there is value in life’s uncertainties, in “the mysteries of night and clarity of day” (Eggers 434). He extends this metaphor to say that humanity was not meant to spend eternity in the day’s light; the Circle,
however, sees no positivity in the time that the night provides us with “to reflect, to sleep” (Eggers 434) and in their attempt to take this time away, they force the Circlers’ brains to their natural breaking points. In his article “Ignorance and Bliss,” Mark Lilla draws attention to the idea that although humanity may mostly “desire to know…we sometimes actively wish to not know — that we prefer to remain in the dark, convinced that it is warmer there…we die of the cold, not of the darkness” (Lilla 75). Instead of always seeking to expand our horizons and push the limitations of our knowledge, we must learn to occasionally enjoy the comfort of boundaries and focus our inquiry within ourselves. We must accept that it is beyond humanity to know everything, and that the only thing in the world we can grow to be completely sure of is ourselves. The outward search for meaning and the hunt for knowledge is, as illustrated by the Circlers, an uphill, never-ending battle, and it erases their opportunity for self-reflection and, in the process, they lose their sense of individuality. Mae becomes a pawn of the Circle, losing her ability to think for herself; her stubborn ignorance of the dangerous future she is helping to create allows her to retain a self-sustaining type of protection, which leaves her in a better situation than Ty, who essentially commits treason against his company in an attempt to stop them from moving forward with their pursuit of nationwide, and likely eventually worldwide, control (Eggers 497).

Throughout the novel, various characters also illustrate the benefits that ignorance may occasionally provide. Despite her growing popularity, after a company-wide poll, Mae comes face to face with a precise percentage of Circlers who harbour any mild dislike of her; this information almost immediately brings her to the brink of a mental breakdown. She exaggerates the report from their thinking her “something other than awesome” (Eggers 409) into them “want[ing] her gone” (Eggers 413), even “preferr[ing] her dead” (Eggers 414), and she has the
traitorous realization that she simply does not want to know how every Circler feels about her, forsaking transparency in this particular instance. As another example, Annie’s participation in a genealogy project with the company quickly backfires on her, revealing the darker parts of her family’s history, both distant and relatively recent; the backlash she receives push her to her breaking point, causing her to fall into a (presumably) stress-induced coma. Before this occurs, she goes even further than Mae does and posts a message about the free release of such information, saying that she does not “know if [they] should know everything” (Eggers 439), rejecting one of the Circle’s most core beliefs. In both examples, the characters would have been happier for certain pieces of information to remain covered. Although we sometimes feel betrayed by the knowledge that a piece of information was kept from us, it is helpful to understand that secrets are often kept not out of malice but in an attempt to preserve our mental well-being.

As the novel progresses, most of the time Mae expresses comfort in the certainty the Circle provides her with; as she immerses in the company’s psyche, the thought of knowledge remaining inaccessible makes her indignant. However, in the moments she spends near the ocean, out on a kayak, she breaks through the mental block the Circle demands and enjoys the peace this brings to her. In the scene Mae takes a kayak out for a late-night venture, unknowingly being filmed by SeeChange cameras, she does not address the expectation to document or preserve the experience. Instead, this gives her the time to reflect on and “take comfort in knowing she would not, and really could not, know much at all” (Eggers 272) about the world around her. Her realization that there are unknowns in the world is attractive because it implies that though there is time for learning and pursuing knowledge, there is also a time for resting, and reflecting on and finding meaning in the discoveries we make. Her ignorance of the fact that
the SeeChange cameras are watching her in this moment is also an important aspect because, as she admits later, she would not have acted in the same way if she had known she was being watched (Eggers 282). She would not have committed the crime she did, but she also would not have experienced that essential moment of peace on the island underneath the bridge. The belief that the wide and unknowable world owes us anything at all is arguable, but the Circle takes this debt to the extreme, and demands that the world owes humanity everything. Turning knowledge into a form of capital is likely the most destructive — and the most human — path the Circlers follow, and it takes away the enjoyment in learning.

The Circle operates on the belief that “all that happens must be known” (Eggers 68), implying that it is our mission as humans to see and know all — to essentially play God, to “normalize judgment” (Foucault 183, qtd. in Wilson 919), and empower any average citizen to “cast judgment upon every other” (Eggers 398). Instead, however, the occasional pleasures of not knowing imply that to understand, and not simply hoard, knowledge — to have the opportunity to pursue it, but to understand when we are better off refraining — is a uniquely wonderful thing. Our acceptance that there are things in the world that are bigger than we will ever be able to comprehend encourages us to search within and create meaning for ourselves. The unknowns in the world are not insults, and they are not challenges, but the Circlers fail to realize that their endless draw to greater power will continue to leave them starving for more, even to the point where there is nothing more to devour.
Works Cited


