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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism***Technological mediation and social isolation in Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2013): A Foucauldian perspective**Aysha Juma Alshamsi¹, Marwan Alqaryouti², Omar Alali² & Linda S. Al-Abbas²¹Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Mohamed Bin Zayed University for Humanities, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates²Department of English Language, Literature and Translation, Zarqa University, Jordan*Correspondence: aysha.alshamsi@mbzuh.ac.ae**ABSTRACT**

In this essay, I will discuss the relationship between technological mediation and the isolation of humans in the writings of Dave Eggers, paying special attention to *The Circle* (2013). In his discussion, the author suggests that Dave Eggers addresses the issue of digital culture and the influence that such factors as surveillance, data transparency, and algorithms have on characters' lives. Based on the theories of digital humanities and panopticism, which Michel Foucault described in his book, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), this paper explains the role of technology in forming the modern panopticon and producing self-monitored individuals. With the use of textual analysis, this essay demonstrates that the novel not only describes technology as the tool for connecting people but rather the factor that increases their emotional separation, undermines the value of their privacy, and changes them from ordinary humans into performative beings who are motivated by numerical measures of success like likes, rating, and visibility. Also, the paper argues that through his novel, Eggers opposes the notion of connectivity and illustrates how, by fulfilling that ideology, one ends up being more isolated despite constant communication. As such, the paper contributes to the discussion surrounding *The Circle* by placing it within the context of surveillance capitalism and the construction of the digital self in the contemporary literary conversation.

KEYWORDS: technological mediation, digital surveillance, panopticism, social media, isolation, identity construction, surveillance capitalism, digital humanities, contemporary fiction, *The Circle* (2013)

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1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has changed the way humans interact, communicate, and perceive themselves in the modern twenty-first century. With social media apps, digital data, and algorithms becoming a part of people's daily routine, the means of connecting and identity formation become mediated through technological means, which has various cultural and social ramifications. Although such technology-based interactions have many positive aspects, the issue of digital culture cannot be discussed without taking into account the phenomenon of surveillance and loss of privacy as well as increasing social and emotional alienation caused by technologies (Turkle, 2017; Zuboff, 2019).

Modern literature became an important source for discussing these issues and exploring them from different angles. In particular, one of the most significant works that discuss the role of digital culture is *The Circle* (2013) by Dave Eggers. This literary work gives readers a rather realistic yet dystopian view on the world, where digital technology has taken control over all aspects of people's lives. Instead of being presented as a mere means of connecting, technology becomes an active factor in transforming social reality and subjectivity (Eggers, 2013).

A conceptual framework underpinning the analysis of *The Circle* is the theory by Michel Foucault, specifically focusing on his study of surveillance and disciplinary power outlined in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). The notion of panopticism proposed by Foucault allows to consider the way systems of visibility work as a form of control leading to a production of individuals who accept the necessity of being watched and become the subject of self-surveillance (Foucault, 1977). However, with the emergence of networked information technology, such tendencies become even more pronounced and voluntary.

In applying the Foucauldian reading of the novel *The Circle* (2013), this paper will focus on the way in which the process of mediation by technological tools operates as panopticism, thus, making people both subject and agent of surveillance. Particularly, it is necessary to discuss the change from the former type of regulation to self-discipline when the need to become visible plays the key role in receiving recognition and acceptance from society (Zuboff, 2019). Such tendency can be seen as a significant transformation in terms of identity since the latter becomes highly performative rather than authentic.

Moreover, the current paper explores the conflict between connectivity and isolation, which is central to the novel. Although connectivity and constant global interaction are presented as benefits in Eggers's work, there emerges an increased feeling of loneliness and estrangement. Relationships are no longer based on personal experience and feelings but rather are based on the quantification of human interactions through metrics, thus turning human beings into numbers that can be easily controlled (Turkle, 2017). It means that the author criticizes not only the existing systems but also the value system on which these systems are built, such as transparency, efficiency, and visibility.

The paper makes valuable contributions to the field of digital humanities as well as to modern literary criticism, as it demonstrates how modern literature approaches the issue of digital surveillance and data capitalism. The current paper analyzes *The Circle* (2013) as a tool for uncovering the power mechanisms that are hidden behind the technologies. By using *The Circle* (2013) as the subject for discussion, the current paper aims to show that the author raises important questions about contemporary culture through literature.

2. Literature Review

Recent research on digital surveillance and technological mediation is focused on changes in power relations associated with the digital era. Extending the ideas of Foucault's classical approach to surveillance, modern studies reveal the development of surveillance as a process moving from classical forms and spaces towards decentralization in digital settings (Bashir, 2021; Kaçar & Aşit, 2025). The modern form of surveillance implies data collection, prediction, and monitoring, thus forming the concept of a "digital panopticon" (Dai, 2025). In this regard, contemporary research emphasizes changes in human behavior associated with the internalization of controls.

In particular, recent studies show how individuals regulate their behavior in digital contexts under conditions of surveillance and constant monitoring due to the feeling of being observed. Thus, modern researchers claim that modern surveillance can be understood as a continuation of Foucault's ideas about disciplinary power (Volosevici, 2025). At the same time, the concept of the panopticon is reinterpreted to fit

modern technologies. The development of modern concepts about panopticism implies its decentralization and omniscience (Lyon, 2018; Farhan, 2026).

Parallel to that, the economic dimension of surveillance has developed into one of the key themes of contemporary debates. In her conceptual framework, the author demonstrates the significance of digital platforms for harvesting individuals' data and making surveillance part of economic relations (Zuboff, 2019). Scholars further develop the theory by demonstrating that individuals actively contribute to surveillance because they willingly provide their data and participate online without realizing the extent of their data exploitation (Kaçar & Aşit, 2025; Dai, 2025). Thus, the lines dividing domination and resistance become blurred in the case when individuals freely collaborate.

Another important strand of research involves examining the consequences of digital mediation for the psychological and social well-being of users. Namely, scholars discuss how continuous observation and algorithmic feedback loops may affect identity construction and interpersonal interactions. The reason is that the sense of identity splits up as it is shaped by creating a virtual version of oneself that relies on metrics and performance (Farhan, 2026). Moreover, findings regarding the effects of using social media show that constant observation and assessment make people feel lonely and disconnected from others (Turkle, 2017; Bashir, 2021). Though a vast amount of scholarly literature has been written regarding digital surveillance, a significant void still exists at the intersection of theory and modern literary scholarship. Although there have been several attempts to theorize about the nature of surveillance and its impact on society from different angles such as the technological, sociological, and psychological perspective, relatively less literature is available on the role of literature in capturing the dynamics of surveillance. Scholarly work addressing this issue is now emerging through an analysis of panopticism and digital control theories within literature (Vološevič, 2025).

Herein, the novels of Dave Eggers, specifically his *The Circle* (2013) will provide a suitable ground for analysis as this novel incorporates a number of key themes that have been discussed recently, such as data commodification, algorithmic governance, and surveillance (internalized) (Eggers, 2013; Zuboff, 2019). Despite the importance of such an approach to Egger's body of literature, academic analysis that focuses on the author's works using the theories and concepts of Foucault is quite limited in this respect.

This paper thus provides an important contribution to the literature on contemporary surveillance culture by analyzing Egger's *The Circle* from the perspective of surveillance studies. Specifically, this paper will use Foucauldian approach to interpret digital subjectivity in the novel under investigation and to expand current discussions regarding the nature of the digital panopticon and digital surveillance.

3. Methodology

The current study employs a qualitative research methodology based on interpretive literary theory to analyze the role of technological mediation and human alienation in Dave Eggers's novel "The Circle" (2013). The present study locates itself in the sphere of digital humanities and uses a theory-oriented methodology with the particular focus on the writings of Michel Foucault on surveillance and disciplinary power.

A. Research Design

This research uses a close textual analysis technique that allows a thorough investigation into the plot, characters, and themes in the novel. The use of close textual analysis technique is appropriate in examining the relationship between literature and socio-technological issues such as surveillance, identity construction, and digital communication (Creswell, 2018). This analysis adopts a deductive approach based on the theoretical ideas of Foucault regarding panopticism, visibility, and self-regulation.

B. Data Source

The main source of information for the analysis is the novel *The Circle* (2013). Specific excerpts from the book, dialogue, and plot events are examined to detect manifestations of surveillance, technological domination, and social alienation. Textual sources were chosen depending on their relationship with the key concepts, including transparency, surveillance, social media activity, and behavioral homogeneity.

C. Analytical Framework

This research is organized around three central Foucauldian ideas drawn from “Discipline and Punish” (1975):

1. Panopticism - The analysis will be focused on how continuous visibility in the digital space results in conditions similar to those created by panopticon (Foucault, 1977).
2. Disciplinary Power - Exploring how people develop an inner sense of being surveilled and how they adjust their actions accordingly.
3. Subject Formation – Examining the process of identity formation that occurs when people use digital visibility systems.

Each of these theoretical ideas will be applied using a thematic approach to content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

D. Procedure

The analysis is done following the systematic approach below:

1. Text Familiarization – A critical reading of the novel to detect the repeated themes that pertain to surveillance and digital interaction.
2. Thematic Coding – Coding of relevant quotes based on Foucauldian concepts (panopticism, discipline, and subjectivity).
3. Interpretive Analysis – Interpretation of the coded information within the context of current theories of surveillance and digital interaction.
4. Theoretical Synthesis – Connecting the findings of the literary analysis to the broader discussion of surveillance capitalism and digital subjectivity formation (Zuboff, 2019; Lyon, 2018).

E. Validity and Rigor

In order to achieve analytical rigor, this study adopts the technique of theoretical triangulation, which combines perspectives from literary criticism, surveillance theory, and digital humanities. This is ensured by the consistent coding and the theoretical constructs that form the basis of the research framework (Nowell et al., 2017).

F. Limitations

Limitations in this research include the restriction to one specific piece of literature that limits the ability to generalize the findings. Nevertheless, the level of depth in analysis helps us to have a profound comprehension of the relationship between technology and human experience. Possible future studies can include analysis of other contemporary pieces of work.

4. Results / Analysis

a. Digital Panopticism and Constant Visibility

It becomes clear through this analysis that the digital world created in *The Circle* (2013), written by Dave Eggers, reflects the panopticon framework developed by Michel Foucault. The organization’s quest for complete transparency creates a framework in which people remain observable at all times and hence are constantly controlled.

This is clearly captured in the novel by the statement: “*Secrets are lies. Sharing is caring. Privacy is theft.*” (Eggers, 2013) It is a complete negation of the value of ethics where privacy does not become an entitlement anymore, but a kind of deviation. The Foucauldian notion of panopticism explains the rationale behind this idea, in which visibility acts as a method of control. People change their behavior not by being compelled to do so, but by internalizing the presence of continuous surveillance (Foucault, 1977).

Mae’s transformation into a “transparent person” provides a clear example of this: “*She had gone transparent, and with that had come an overwhelming sense of clarity.*” (Eggers, 2013) Here, transparency is framed as empowerment, yet it simultaneously functions as a disciplinary mechanism. The illusion of autonomy masks the deeper structure of control, reinforcing the internalization of surveillance.

b. Self-Regulation and Disciplinary Power

This shows that the novel depicts surveillance as something internal rather than external. The characters are willing to engage in surveillance mechanisms, thus supporting Foucault's idea of disciplinary power where individuals control their actions in the anticipation of being observed.

The increasing reliance of Mae on social validation is a good example of this: "*Her ranking was slipping, and she felt a sudden rush of anxiety.*" (Eggers, 2013) This scene shows how the use of digital measures such as ranking, likes, and engagement scores serves as tools for controlling behavior. Control is no longer enforced by direct authorities but by the algorithmic analysis and peer scrutiny. Peer disapproval is the new form of punishment, thus making the system self-regulating.

Further, participation is made mandatory by social pressure instead of force.: "*It was no longer acceptable to opt out.*" (Eggers, 2013) This is an indication of a shift from surveillance by coercion to voluntary participation, whereby failure to be part of the system is seen as deviant or even immoral. This kind of practice demonstrates the application of discipline within digital culture.

c. Identity as Digital Performance

One of the most important observations is the development of identity as a performance mediated by technology. The characters in the novel constantly curate and evaluate their identities via digital technology, thus leaving little room for authenticity and making it an issue of outputs.

In the case of Mae, her online identity seems to be increasingly distant from her true self: "She became more herself the more she shared." (Eggers, 2013) Although it may sound strange, this quote shows how identity can be performed and constructed. It is clear from the current research that such "self" is artificial to a certain degree and relies heavily on external validation. Moreover, it corresponds with the current views on digital subjectivity and its performative aspects.

One should also take into account the following quote: "To not respond was to betray the system." (Eggers, 2013) Clearly, silence here could be seen as rebellion against the system.

d. The Paradox of Connectivity and Isolation

Although connection was present through all stages of the research, it can be clearly seen that the novel depicts a rise in feelings of emotional loneliness among its characters. Interpersonal communication occurs through the screen, and interpersonal communication is replaced by mere information exchange.

The more Mae uses the digital world, the more she becomes emotionally isolated from her family members, thus proving that high levels of connectivity do not necessarily ensure improved interpersonal communication and relationships.

This paradox forms the ground for the criticism expressed in the novel; namely, the more connected people are, the lonelier they feel socially and emotionally.

From the theoretical point of view, this conclusion corresponds to the current discussion of digital culture since, according to Turkle, high levels of connectivity generate fragmentation of attention and empathy.

e. Surveillance Capitalism and Voluntary Participation

The analysis also shows that *The Circle* predicts essential elements of surveillance capitalism. The users voluntarily offer information, which is used to strengthen the power and profitability of the system.

The ideology of voluntary information exchange is demonstrated through the following lines from the novel: "All that happens must be known." (Eggers, 2013) It implies that complete transparency is viewed as an advantage to society. People are made to take part in the process of surveillance, thus removing the boundaries between coercion and consent.

As a result, the novel demonstrates that power works not by controlling people, but by involving them into processes that strengthen the system.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Technological Mediation and Human Isolation in *The Circle* have been analyzed from the perspective of Foucauldian surveillance and power. It was found that *The Circle* can be described as an example of digital

panopticon, when visibility is used as a means of control, people internalize surveillance and self-regulate their behavior according to Michel Foucault's dynamics of power.

It can be concluded that identity in the age of digital mediation becomes more performative and based on algorithms that assess the individual based on their exposure to various stimuli. However, there is an important contradiction: although digital technologies aim to connect us, they, at the same time, make us detached socially. In such a way, *The Circle* is a critique of technological systems that value visibility and communication over privacy.

First of all, from the perspective of theory, the article uses the theories of Foucault on power in digital settings, proving how power operates through participation rather than coercion. Secondly, from the practice standpoint, the research highlights the need for raising awareness regarding the risks involved in digital settings and enhancing digital literacy among the general public. Future studies within the topic can cover comparative literature review and even quantitative analysis.

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