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Unveiling Data Colonialism: A Critical Examination of Surveillance, Power, and Information Control in "The Circle" by Dave Eggers

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	While many people would think that Colonialism is long over, the contemporary digital revolution gives some ominous signs that belief is false. While bringing about many great beneficial solutions that contribute much to the prosperity and welfare of human beings, data technology is always linked to privacy threats and increased social inequality. This paper attempts to investigate the concept of data colonialism as portrayed in Dave Eggers' most celebrated novel "The Circle," providing a conceptual framework to analyse the current manifestation of colonial elements in the parallels between the corporation's overwhelming surveillance practices and historic forms territorial colonialism. The study will also shed some light on the elimination of personal autonomy and privacy in contemporary society, explaining how The Circle exploits its employees by means of extracting and manipulating their personal data. This research further explores the economic, cultural, and social consequences of this digital form of colonialism in an attempt to point out the ethical concerns that are usually associated with the manipulation of personal information for corporates' materialistic advantage. Additionally, the research will examine how the novel portrays resistance and defiance against corporate surveillance, drawing comparisons to real-world movements that advocate data privacy and digital rights. The paper reaches a final conclusion that there is an urgent need for legislative frameworks and heightened public awareness to secure personal digital liberty. It also gives a warning against the power dynamics associated with data colonialism, and advocates for a fairer and more balanced digital society.

INTRODUCTION

Discussions about data colonialism are relatively new. The concept usually refers to the exploitation of data -legally or illegally- extracted from people. The phenomenon is also known as digital colonialism (Coleman, 2019), digital imperialism (Gajjala & Birzescu, 2011), data coloniality (Benyera, 2021), and algorithmic colonialism (Birhane, 2020), among others with a combination of similar terms.

The term "data colonialism" can simply be defined as a new and emerging social order that is characterized by a continuous extraction of data from our lives and from the domains surrounding our lives by corporations producing these technologies. The idea of "data colonialism" has been extensively explored by Couldry and Mejias (2019). They argue that contemporary data extraction practices are actually modernized reminiscent of the historical forms of colonial exploitation. For them, data colonialism is an updated form of capitalism, where personal data becomes a commodity

that is used to proclaim control over individuals and societies. Following the same line of thought, Zuboff (2019) provides a thorough examination of how technology companies utilize data to create new markets and exercise significant dominance over humans. Her concept of "surveillance capitalism" illustrates the economic motivation behind data exploitation, where different methods are used to collect personal data and eventually turning them into material profit.

Van Dijck (2014) and Lyon (2018), on the other hand, observed the ethical implications of data exploitation. Both stressed the importance the formulation of legal frameworks to protect personal privacy and autonomy. Lyon illustrates the profound effects of extensive monitoring on social and cultural life, emphasizing the dynamic relationship between power, control, and opposition. Similarly, Hintz and Wahl-Jorgensen's (2018) refers to the importance of contemporary movements that advocate data privacy and digital rights. They discuss popular efforts directed towards countering corporate surveillance, advocating for regulatory changes. Their study on the growing body of literature on digital rights underscores the importance of public awareness and activism in protecting individual privacy in the digital age.

Recent critical studies usually refer to the enduring impact of Dave Eggers' novels within contemporary literary and cultural production. Scholars usually tackle the thematic content and narrative techniques in his writings, paying much attention to his exploration of themes such as the tension between individual freedom and societal control, the impact of trauma, and the moral complexities of modern life. Sarah Thompson, for instance, points out the parallelism between "What Is the What" and "Zeitoun," focusing on the author's portrayal of the themes of resilience and displacement (2019.) For her, Eggers usually portray his characters in the face of significant personal and societal challenges while also delving into the broader social and political contexts surrounding the novels. In 2020, she undertakes further scholarly research, examining Eggers' satirical work "The Captain and the Glory" as a political allegory. The study specifically investigates the novel's critique of contemporary political leadership, shedding light on Eggers' use of satire to expose the absurdities and dangers of present-day political processes. Additionally, she assesses the effectiveness of the novel in conveying its political message through allegory and humor.

Humanitarianism and Ethics are commonly addressed as prominent themes in Dave Eggers' writings. John Hill (2020) analyses the allegorical components of "The Parade" and its criticism of Western interventionism in emerging nations. The study examines the ethical uncertainties encountered by the main characters and the moral consequences of their choices. It also discusses the novel's commentary on the complexities of humanitarian aid and development, thereby enhancing the understanding of ethical dilemmas in literature, particularly in the context of global development and humanitarianism. Laura Miller, on the other hand, focuses on the narrative ethics and representation of trauma in Eggers' fictionalized autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng, "What Is the What." The paper discusses how Eggers balances factual accuracy with fictional elements to convey the emotional truth of Deng's experience. It also examines the ethical considerations involved in representing real-life trauma through fiction.

Few critics if any, however, have touched upon the theme of data colonialism, highlighting the parallels between the corporation's pervasive surveillance practices and historical forms of colonial dominance. Through an interdisciplinary approach, this study endeavours to examine the parallels between the intricate dynamics of data colonialism as portrayed and critiqued within the fictional world of "The Circle" and real-world concerns about privacy, autonomy, and power.

DISCUSSION

As explained earlier, the concept of data colonialism is often recognized as a crucial concept for understanding the significant changes in power dynamics brought about by the advent of the digital age. As the term implies, data colonialism refers to the resemblance between contemporary data

extraction and exploitation methods as well as historical forms of colonialism. This perspective highlights how data, much like land and resources during the colonial era, is seized and controlled by powerful entities, often at the expense of individual autonomy and privacy.

According to Zuboff (2019), we are living in a stage of surveillance capitalism which the author defines as "A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales". She refers to the claim performed through datafication processes that transform all aspects of human behaviour into collectible data. In "The Circle" Dave Eggers is keen to portray data colonialism through three major themes. These are: power dynamics and information control, ethical dilemmas and privacy erosion, and resistance and societal shifts.

Dave Eggers' "The Circle" portrays the monopolistic attitudes of tech giants. The writer illustrates how a single corporation can dominate multiple aspects of life, from social interactions to governance. "The Circle's power was so complete", Eggers describes, "that it seemed impossible to imagine life without it. It was as if the company had become a country of its own, with its own customs, rules, and even language" (Eggers 202). The extent of The Circle's reach and the comprehensive control it exerts over various facets of daily life mirrors the concept of data colonialism, where a few powerful entities control vast amounts of data, perpetuating inequalities and exerting influence over individuals and societies.

In "The Circle," the corporation deploys an extensive range of surveillance technologies to monitor and control individuals. The company's slogan, "Secrets are lies," (Eggers 303) encapsulates its philosophy of total transparency, where privacy is viewed as an impediment to societal progress. Couldry and Mejias (2019) in "The Costs of Connection: How Data is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism" supports this view, arguing that data colonialism forces the rhetoric of transparency and accountability to justify extensive surveillance. The Circle's invasive practices include mandatory social media sharing, omnipresent cameras, and constant data tracking, which are all justified under the guise of enhancing connectivity and security. "If everyone is watching, you'll be your best self. There's no better motivation than knowing that others are watching. It keeps you honest" (Eggers 305). This clearly indicates the ethical justification used by The Circle to promote its surveillance agenda, where constant monitoring leads to better behavior, ignoring the ethical implications of surveillance without informed consent and the right to privacy. According to Stefania Forlini (2020), these surveillance mechanisms reflect real-world practices tech giants when collecting people's data, drawing attention to the subtle yet profound ways in which personal autonomy is compromised.

The theme of ethical dilemmas and privacy erosion is evidently portrayed in the novel. Dave Eggers critiques the profound consequences of a society where privacy is systematically eroded by a powerful tech corporation. The Circle's quest for total transparency results in the aggressive surveillance of every aspect of personal life, effectively deleting the concept of personal privacy. This theme echoes the idea of data colonialism, where personal data is continuously attacked and exploited, often without informed consent, leading to significant ethical implications. The Circle's methods, according to Van Dijck's theory, devalue human experiences by converting them into marketable data points through datafication, a method of converting social activities into measurable data over the internet.

One pivotal moment in the novel is the introduction of the See Change cameras, which can be placed anywhere to provide live video feeds. This technology is presented as a tool for accountability and security, but it effectively eliminates privacy. Eggers writes, "ALL THAT HAPPENS MUST BE KNOWN," encapsulating the philosophy of surveillance that pervades The Circle and its impacts on individual autonomy.

The notion that privacy was a smokescreen for wrongdoing and that transparency was a virtue—this had become a truism. There was no longer any strong argument against knowing everything" (Eggers 68).

This very idea has been emphasised elsewhere where the writer affirms that "The camera's eye was always there, always watching. There was no longer a moment that wasn't documented, scrutinized, judged" (Eggers 122).The novel vividly depicts the distructive effect of violating personal autonomy through its protagonist, Mae Holland, who becomes increasingly involved in The Circle's surveillance device. Initially enthusiastic about the company's mission, Mae gradually loses self-confidence as the firm's culture continues to monitor and affect her actions and thoughts:

"Mae felt as if she were no longer herself, but a product of The Circle. Her thoughts, her actions, everything was now dictated by the need to be seen, to be validated by the watchers" (Eggers 321).

This shift highlights the sinister nature of surveillance, where constant observation and data collection lead individuals to follow fixed patterns of expected behaviours thereby losing their distinctive personality. Mae's decision to go "transparent" exposing every bit of her life on camera 24/7 illustrates another example pervasive monitoring resulting into identity loss and lack of genuineness. In Zuboff's description of "surveillance capitalism," she describes the economic pressures that drive data colonialism by showing how personal information is being extracted and then sold (2019, 8). This perspective is essential in understanding the economic motivations behind The Circle's data practices and their impact on personal autonomy.

Eggers, elsewhere, illustrates how The Circle's surveillance practices results in a culture of self-censorship where people change their behaviour to fit in with what they assume are the normal expectations. Loss of privacy brings about this form of self-suppression as one fears being watched all the time, thus, he/she cannot feel independent. Furthermore, the title of the novel itself bears an allegorical dimension, as the increasingly all-encompassing power of the Circle threatens to encircle all dimensions of the characters' lives. On one of the novel's final pages, this correlation is explicitly confirmed: "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"(481).

The denial of personal autonomy depicted in "The Circle" prompts crucial ethical considerations regarding the interplay of technological progress and individual rights. The novel examines the ethical consequences of turning personal data into commodities, where the collection and utilization of information prioritize corporate interests over individual liberties. This examination aligns with ongoing discussions about data privacy and surveillance capitalism, emphasizing the necessity of ethical frameworks to regulate the handling of personal data. John Danaher (2022), in the publication "Ethics and Information Technology," highlights the ethical queries arising from these practices and the potential for exploitation and control. Conversely, Floridi emphasizes the importance of privacy in safeguarding autonomy by allowing individuals to make self-governing decisions without external influence (Floridi,2018). "The Circle", thus, represents a cautionary tale about the dangers of unrestrained technological advancement; a type of dystopian fiction, to use Booker (1994) and Moylan (2000) term, used to represent a form of social and political criticism of the present. According to Booker, dystopian literature reflects society's fears, thus providing a framework for understanding "The Circle" as a warning about the risks of unregulated corporate spying. In the same context, Moylan's idea of "critical dystopia" is particularly relevant, since it emphasizes the possibility of opposition and alternative perspectives.

Eggers repeatedly encourages his readers to contemplate the societal impact of corporate surveillance. The practices of The Circle create a society where individual freedom is overridden by corporate influence. "The Circle" actually suggests that unrestricted surveillance not only threatens personal freedom but also endangers democratic principles, as the concentration of power in the

hands of a few corporations can challenge civil liberties and social justice. Laura Bieger (2023) analyses how "The Circle" explores the cultural standardization resulting from widespread corporate surveillance. She argues that Eggers criticizes the diminishing of individuality and the moulding of societal norms by technology companies. Matthew Mullins (2021), likewise, explains how "The Circle" portrays resistance with the detailed portrayal of how its characters respond to the oppressive surveillance system. He argues that Eggers' depiction of rebellion serves as a commentary on the potentials and limitations of resisting digital domination, which draws parallels to contemporary movements advocating for digital rights and privacy. Likewise, Lyon (2018) discusses how individuals and communities can combat pervasive surveillance through activism, legal action, and the development of privacy-enhancing technologies. Noble (2018), too, emphasizes the necessity of challenging surveillance systems that disproportionately affect marginalized communities, stressing the ethical obligation to resist such invasive technologies.

In "The Circle", Eggers constantly stresses the importance of the idea of pushing back against The Circle's pervasive control, shedding light on the potential opportunity for reclaiming autonomy. Characters like Mercer embody active resistance to The Circle's surveillance, thereby offering an alternative perspective to the culture of compliance: "Mae, can't you see what this is doing to you, to us, to everyone? This isn't freedom. This is enslavement"(Eggers 321). Mercer's stand brings forth the ethical dilemmas and personal sacrifices entwined with living under constant surveillance. His viewpoint challenges the notion that surveillance is inherently valuable and instead underscores its dehumanizing impacts. However, Mercer's tragic outcome underlines the doomed fate which those opposing the surveillance state usually encounter.

CONCLUSION

Dave Eggers' "The Circle" offers a thought-provoking presentation of data colonialism. It sheds light on the growing similarity between the company's monopolization of personal data and historical forms of colonial control. That is to say, through the manipulation of data extraction, The Circle is able to generate profits and, at the same time, gives a true definition of data colonialism, where monitoring becomes a means of control and exploitation. In so doing, the firm's strategies echo the policies employed by earlier colonial powers in order to exploit their populations. In portraying The Circle's surveillance methods and the traumatic effects these methods have on its population, Eggers proposes significant inquiries about privacy, individuality, and responsible technology use. It is by means of this horrific portrayal of ravished data privacy that the novel proposes the necessity for a balanced approach to technological progress; one that protects personal freedom and fosters ethical principles in the present digital world. In an era marked by continual contemplation of surveillance and data commercialization, "The Circle" remains a pertinent and cautionary narrative about the potential consequences of ravishing personal privacy for the allure of connectivity and safety.

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