SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM AND IT'S LITERARY REPRESENTATION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF DAVE EGGERS' *THE CIRCLE*

Hasnain Abbas
(Corresponding Author)
M. Phil. Scholar at Riphah International University, Faisalabad Campus, Pakistan
Email: haidersahmal360@gmail.com
Kashaf Zulfiqar
Lecturer at Riphah International University, Faisalabad Campus, Pakistan
Email: Kashafzulfiqar29@gmail.com
Prof. Dr. Mazhar Hayat
Head of Department at Riphah International University, Faisalabad Campus, Pakistan

Abstract

This paper examines The Circle *(2013) by Dave Eggers through the lens of Shoshana Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism. It is a new economic system where personal data is extracted and monetized to influence consumer behavior and control human actions. The novel features the commodification of privacy by software giants, including the fictionalized Circle, which conveys how the tech firms use statistical and marketing tools in order to influence personal choices, as well as crowd behavior. The paper investigates the behavioral surplus that is data beyond service optimisation through the character of Mae Holland that helps to predict and alter upcoming actions. The novel is also concerned with the intangible forms of power that have been created in surveillance capitalism, the notion of instrumentarian power in the novel shows how data driven systems control decision making without the awareness of the individual. As Mae grows closer to the system The Circle has created, the control they exert on her thoughts has become less obvious; Mae slowly loses her sense of individuality as she turns into the manipulated behavior pursued by the algorithms created at the company. The paper also explores the dilution of privacy and political consequences of surveillance capitalism where personal data has found its way into politics where opinions and democracy are manipulated by the management of these data. By comparing The Circle to Zuboff, the paper identifies the ethical impact of surveillance capitalism and how it threatens to undermine the personal freedom and autonomy as well as the integrity of democracy in the era of the internet.*

Key Words: Surveillance capitalism, behavioral surplus, instrumentarian power, privacy commodification, data manipulation

Introduction

In the era of the digital technologies and advancements, the limitation between individual privacy, autonomy and corporate authority is fast disappearing. One of the most striking developments in the modern economic landscape is the emergence of surveillance capitalism, a term coined by Shoshana Zuboff in her groundbreaking work *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019). This new type of capitalism will be based on personal data extraction and commodification in which companies and corporations, like Google, Facebook, and Amazon, use the large quantities of data that consumers can generate to predict and manipulate behavior in order to make a profit. In her examination, Zuboff states that surveillance capitalism is a paradigm shift, whereby the basis of the market economy is not based on the creation of goods and services but instead it is based on the control of human behaviour through the accumulation of personal data. Information that was once just an anonymously traced by-product of a consumer behaviour is now the very source of value that business use to promote a system of

control that has spilled outside the financial aspect and has affected the social, political and even the psychological, arenas.

The Circle is a fictional yet terrifyingly realistic story about the surveillance capitalism society. Eggers presents his story to demonstrate their growing hegemony and the power of tech company to control and manipulate human behaviour embedding huge amounts of data. It is a story of a young woman Mae Holland, who joins the company, which is called The Circle, where exposing personal information, being watched and selling it is the main core of the business. Mae turning from a free person to a fully integrated part of a system that tracks and monitors every action and uses it is reflective of the real-life consequences of a surveillance capitalism that Zuboff asserts exists. In the story about Mae, *The Circle* aims at casting judgment on the risk of resentment of personal information, commercialization of information and increasing magnanimity of companies that operate the mechanism.

The convergence points between surveillance capitalism and the themes covered in *The Circle* brings out the vast implications of a data-driven society. In this paper, I would like to explicate the nature of surveillance capitalism, as described in Eggers' *The Circle*, and how the novel exemplifies the main principles of Zuboff theory. In reviewing the novel through the approach of surveillance capitalism, this paper helps us to gain deeper insight into all the issues of the interaction between technology, power and human actions in the digital era. Specifically, it will address how behavioural surplus, instrumentarian power and the commodification of privacy can be found in *The Circle*, offering a critical discussion of the moral, social and political consequences of this new economy.

Surveillance capitalism represents a shift that marks a fundamental change in the capitalist system. That is the aspect taken in traditional capitalism, which is conducted through the selling of goods and services against financial value, with the consumer being an avid participant in the exchange of this value. In surveillance capitalism, however, it is not the consumer that constitutes the main party to the economic exchange. Rather, as the tech firms mine the consumers themselves, their data is collected, processed, and sold. This information, covering everything up to web searches and social media behaviour all the way through activities like location tracking and online shopping, is in turn used to anticipate and sway future actions. As Zuboff (2019) puts it, "Surveillance capitalism seeks to predict and modify human behavior as a means to produce revenue and market control" (p. 7). This type of capitalism is not fuelled by the acquisition of tangible commodities but, rather, by the ever-present harvest of personal information and data.

The most notable feature of the surveillance capitalism is the hoarding of behavioural surplus, a phenomenon the latter is identifying and defining as the data captured that is not required in providing the service. Originally, tech corporations started with compiling data to help maximize user experience. But as firms became aware of the value in this information, they sought more and more of it, much than was required to make the services better. This superfluous data- which is composed of extensive data about the individual likes, habits and psychological make-up - has since become one of the major assets that firms such as Google, Facebook and Amazon have. This information is then applied in predicting, controlling and altering the behavior of man. The behavioural surplus is what the algorithms that drive services like Facebook and Google utilize to provide personalized content or recommendations, advertisements, etc, influencing the behavior of the users without their being conscious of it.

The behavioural surplus lies in the heart of power relations inside the surveillance capitalism. Zuboff (2019) argues that "behavioural surplus is the hidden force that drives not just advertising, but also the personalized experiences that users have on platforms like Facebook, Google, and Amazon" (p. 95). By collecting data on users' habits, preferences, and interactions, tech companies are able to predict future behavior and adjust their offerings

accordingly, creating a feedback loop that reinforces users' existing behaviours. To users, this behavioural changing process is largely unseen, and to what degree they are controlled by the algorithms. As Zuboff notes, "The more personalized the experience, the less individuals recognize the ways in which their behavior is being engineered" (p. 108). It is this nefarious ability to control human behavior at a deeply psychological level that exposes the surveillance form of capitalism as one of the chief worries Zuboff makes in her analysis.

The Circle gives the fictional exploration of the surveillance capitalism that is actually very relevant. The setting is a world in which a super-urethane company, *The Circle*, monitors and dictates every information and privacy. The core of the business of the company is the idea of complete transparency, or the belief that all elements of an individual life must be put under scrutiny. *The Circle* follows Mae Holland through the gates, as she joins *The Circle* as an employee and soon becomes immerged in the data context of the organization. However, she shifts after reading the company ideology, as she becomes more dependent on the company system of validation and loses a part of her privacy to keep her status in the company. *The Circle* echoes the major principles of the surveillance capitalism in the life of Mae. In the company, personal data is not only captured but it is commodified and assured that transparency will translate to better and more connected world. But as the story reasoning progresses, it becomes evident that this openness is not a conquest to gloat but a way of controlling. Holding significance in terms of surveillance capitalism, the surveillance systems of *The Circle* (e.g., the so-called See Change cameras that film every second of Mae) are also symbolic of the intangible quality of surveillance capitalism. Meanwhile, the fact Mae thinks she is contributing to the greater good of the world because of her complete transparency is an echo of how the surveillance capitalism disorients users into thinking that the surveillance is actually their strength. Such empowerment is however false since Mae choices are always determined by the company algorithms and data driven processes.

The theme of behavioural surplus is also clear during the case of Mae and her experience within *The Circle* data-driven world. As Mae begins to fit more into the company culture, she is even more and more influenced through the feedback systems introduced by the companies' systems. Let's take the example of Mae whose increasing interest in her profile given by the company, which in fact was the measure of her transparency and visibility demonstrates how behavioural surplus is used to abide by preferred actions. This is exactly what happens to Mae who starts to internalize the values of *The Circle*, where she gradually transforms through doing what the company wants her to and believes that she is making independent decisions, when it is actually the company that is programming her.

The way Mae changes in *The Circle* has been used by many people to represent the psychological and social impacts of surveillance capitalism. Her personal value is based upon how much she is open, visible in the realm of *The Circle* where her self-worth is defined based on her performance on *The Circle* platform. As she gains an increased reliance on the company to provide validation to her, Mae loses her sense of individuality and autonomy. The constant loop of feedback in *The Circle* effected by the predictive algorithms encourages Mae to self-regulate herself, enforcing the corporal control of her actions by the firm. This process mirrors Zuboff's (2019) argument that surveillance capitalism creates individuals who monitor and regulate themselves, driven by external forces they do not fully understand.

In addition to its impact on individual behavior, surveillance capitalism also has dramatic consequences as far as democracy and political processes are concerned. In *The Circle*, the firm also has the power to control the political sphere by means of regulating the opinion and influencing the voting process. Mae participation in the effort of the company to establish a completely transparent sphere of reality is one of the instances of the risks of surveillance capitalism in the political aspect. Since Mae is involved in the ideological project

of *The Circle* in part, she gets more and more aware of the role of the company in the development of political beliefs and behaviours. Using its immense abilities to collect information, *The Circle* is able to customise political propaganda to the specific individual using the information they have on them, slightly influencing their politics and political choices.

Zuboff (2019) warns that surveillance capitalism poses a significant threat to democracy by manipulating public discourse and undermining the democratic process. With strategic manipulation of data instead of political discussion and debate, the sphere of the commonplace is the less unified and manipulated by corporate control. The presentation of political content targeting in the novel, as is coined in the case of Cambridge Analytica, exemplifies the threat of data manipulation in elections. According to Zuboff (2019), political campaigns have shifted away from being focused on ideas and debates, and instead, are now driven by data-driven strategies that aim to manipulate behavior rather than promote democratic discussions. Zuboff (2019) believes that "political campaigns are no longer about the discussion of ideas and debate but rather have been dominated by data driven strategies using behavior modifying approaches instead of building a healthy democracy through discussion" (p. 310). In *The Circle*, this has been added to directly, as a result of surveillance capitalism, where political pursuits are not reached by connecting with political thinking but rather, data-based plans, use voter mindsets.

Literature Review

Aardema (2014) delves into the issue of gender inequality in *The Circle*, arguing that the novel presents a biased representation of gender. The main character, Mae, is enclosed in the surroundings of male employees who occupy the top levels of the company. The women in the organization are placed in lower levels roles such as the customer care officers and there are no female engineers in the organization to innovate technology. The three founders of the company are all men, yet they portray themselves as men in high power and intelligence and this solidifies patriarchal architecture of the company. Aardema accentuates the lack of women in roles influencing the future of the technological world making it less significant and relevant to the company. Mae's friend, Annie Allerton, further illustrates the marginalization of women. Her inability to balance her work and life depicts the tension women have under a system that does not support them enough and therefore represents gender inequality in *The Circle*.

Parama Gururaj and Subha (2023) use the theory of power offered by Michel Foucault to address the means of control in *The Circle*. Their argument is that the firm employs its technological advancements such as the TruYou system in order to control both in the virtual and real world. Capillary power as discovered by Foucault also applies well in this case since the ability of the company to act and exert power is done at the micro-level of everyday life and can be observed through the collection of personal data and surveillance through data tracking. With the help of the so-called TruYou system, the company can obtain personal data on a mass scale, which significantly changes the identity of users and allows uninterrupted monitoring. Further, it is analogous to the panopticon proposed by Foucault, through which surveillance becomes a tool of control and direction of actions. *The Circle*'s ideology of transparency, which is presented as a tool for democracy and anti-corruption, masks the true nature of its operations. The company uses both employees and people to make it sound as if being transparent will be a means of empowerment, whereas it is a measure that the company adds to restrict and control the behavior of the people. By exposing the employees to Mae through her character, the business creates a form of soft power in the company by subtly persuading employees to embrace monitoring as an inseparable aspect of the order. Moreover, the influence of the company is not limited to the borders of the company putting pressure on

those in political services, including Olivia Santos, in order to reveal confidential information invading the political arena and changing the field of democracy.

Maurer and Rostbøll (2020) analyse *The Circle* in the context of contemporary digital democracy, highlighting the novel's critique of technological governance. They review the idea of demoxie, an online democracy model that *The Circle* has advocated and which erases the distinctions between corporate and state authority. Technological determinism embodied in the company with its digital identity system, TruYou and initiatives towards direct voting platforms is an attempt to simplify government by consolidating control in the hands of the few business interests. The authors address the possible risks of such system that will refuse the democratic difference in favour of one technology-driven mode of governance. The society of *The Circle* is defined by such aspects as control, surveillance, observation, and integration of the technology inside all realms of life. This gives the appearance of voluntary totalitarianism, the ability to think that personal freedom is sacrificed to convenience at the seeming expansion of choice. *The Circle* turns the democratic practices into a behavior that has to conform to the technological systems because people are forced to adjust to the emerging norms set through digital tools.

Rana (2021) takes a closer look at the theme of surveillance and privacy in *The Circle*, analysing the effects of total transparency on society. This is because the illustration of how Mae Holland evolves into an entirely transparent person in the novel highlights the ramifications of a society in which there is no privacy. Drawing on the theories of discipline and power, developed by Foucault, Rana claims that the self-regulation happens due to the normalization of surveillance that turns individual people into subjects, who self-regulate themselves. It is also important that the surveillance system has capitalist roots. The book *The Circle* has themes of data collection and data commodification as a point to the business model of the company in which it makes its users its products. The novel also criticizes how the surveillance platforms, especially those linked to social media, violate boundaries between the private and the public spaces. This leads to a kind of system that not only infringes on the privacy of an individual but also to capitalise on users. The sale and purchase of personal information in *The Circle* showcase the capitalistic tendency to acquire fortunes by commercializing the life of individuals. The novel is an accusation of increased acceptability of surveillance technologies and the threat that they pose to personal control.

Saudi (2024) discussed the context of *The Circle*; the idea of data colonialism is close to that of the exploitation of resources by colonists. The corporate dominance in data is similar to that of the colonial powers with control of land and resources to satisfy themselves. The slogan of the company, which is the topic of the film *The Circle*, Secrets are lies, summarizes the ideas of the company that privacy is a hindrance to progress. Saudi contends that the presented surveillance methods in the novel are not advantageous to the society but instead promote the deprivation of individuality due to lack of freedom. The form of surveillance capitalism depicted in the novel is one in which the personal information is stripped and monetized that results in the loss of privacy, and sense of autonomy. The novel criticizes how the idea of surveillance technologies is promoted as a means to self-improve coming up with the reality of surveillance and control over people. The case of Saudi is especially important to discuss the matter of morality and ethics of collecting personal information against will, and the example of characters like Mercer that rebel against the system shown by the novel reflects the results that can be achieved by breaking corporate domination.

Khan (2024) explores the social and psychological effects of surveillance, focusing on Mae's experience as she becomes increasingly enmeshed in the surveillance system at *The Circle*. At first, Mae feels that the transparent values of the company will result in increased social connection and improvement. Nevertheless, as the plot advances, she is deprived of her

personal identity and turns into a consumer of monitoring system of the company. These systems, which are enhanced by AI, such as the See Change cameras, are instrumental in the change, since they track the person in real time and ensure adherence. By stimulating people to consider that their actions should be consistent with the requirements of the system, these technologies, Khan states, guarantee self-regulation. As Mae loses her personal traits and adheres to the requirements of the company, she becomes deprived of her personality. The study goes to highlight the threats of using AI-based surveillance not only to monitor people, but also to transform their behavior and impair their autonomy.

Lyon (2018) provides a broader psychological perspective on surveillance, discussing its effects on emotional well-being. In *The Circle*, such characters as Mae and Mercer are undergoing psychological discomfort caused by the permanent observation. Lyon states that surveillance creates anxiety, stress and paranoia-like state since people are under progression control and assessment. The all-pervasive view in *The Circle* compels members of the society to adjust their ways to the proposed ideologies, and this becomes counterproductive in developing their self-identities as they resort into emotional crises. Based on her interpretations of the experiences described in the novel, Lyon derives parallels to real-life problems connected to psychological outcomes of surveillance primarily concerning the damage that being watched all the time can inflict on the mental well-being of people.

İŞIK (2020) argues that in the modern age individuals disclose their private information voluntarily. The move in surveillance, away from exterior policing to self-interiorized surveillance, is an essential motif found in *The Circle*. The novel reveals how the concept of surveillance has changed, in that, it is no longer a means of social control, but an activity in which individuals choose to take part. With more people getting used to the idea of letting the digital world take part in their lives, they internalize the surveillance process and act the way they are expected to be observed. This change results, according to IK, in the destruction of privacy and individuality as people are more focused on the opinion of the mass than in the search of personal truth.

Bueno (2018) critiques transhumanism in *The Circle*, arguing that the novel presents a dystopian view of technological advancement. Initially, the products of *The Circle*, i.e. data distribution systems, monitoring equipment, etc., are offered as the means of human prosperity. However, later on in the story, it can be seen that these measures are meant to conscript and abuse people other than empower them. The novel criticizes this corporate exploitation of trial and error and how this corporate world uses it to continue being powerful and profitable. Bueno points out the dissimilarity between the early utopianism of transhumanism and the eventual preference that technology is employed to eliminate the personal liberties and precarities.

Hobbs (2017) examines the neoliberal economic context in *The Circle*, arguing that the novel reflects the destructive effects of neoliberal policies. In the novel, Mae aspiration to be valued more in the company is the larger pursuit of self-interest at the expense of self-determination. Hobbs links this with the emergence of neoliberalism where economic policies based on markets put established profits over human rights. The novel is a critique of how neoliberalism transforms the lives of people and makes individuals prisoners of this system that rewards profitability and productivity rather than personal freedom.

McKenna III (2023) offers a Marxist analysis of *The Circle*, focusing on the exploitation of digital labour. He makes similarities between the novel and the social media platforms saying that they both utilize user-generated content to make profits. In *The Circle*, personal data of employees are valued as products to be sold by the company to other parties. McKenna states that the novel reveals the inequalities of digital capitalism where people are set to being mere pieces of data that can be monetised by mega-corporations. In this critique,

the dehumanizing interactions of corporate control and use of personal information have been noted in terms of how people have become subject to surveillance and exploitation.

Mathew (2020) explores the development of panopticon in the digital era and postulates that the new surveillance tools available today, e.g., social media and data gathering programs, provide a different kind of observation that is applied to every area of an individual life. Mathew forms the viewpoint that digital panopticon has been used to attain social control that fortifies oppressive systems by triggering uniform social norms. He also speaks of the morals of mass digital surveillance, which, according to him, disrespects privacy and autonomy as well as concentrates the power in the hand of those who possess the information

Materials and Methods

Conceptual Framework

The notion of surveillance capitalism, which has been advanced by Zuboff (2019). *The age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight over a Human Future* (2019) offers an analytical framework through which it is possible to evaluate the power relations and the societal shifts occurring due to the accumulation and use of personal information. The emergence of the surveillance capitalism is the novel economic system where personal data are to be considered as the commodity that is extracted and data-mined and finally sold to generate profits. Zuboff's framework challenges the traditional economic, social, and political foundations of capitalism, arguing that this new economic system reshapes human behavior and undermines democratic and individual freedoms. Within this theoretical context, data extraction is no longer merely an instrument to the improved provision of services, but, on the contrary, the foundational form of new political regimes of control and social governance.

The Conceptualization of Surveillance Capitalism

Surveillance capitalism is fundamentally defined by Zuboff (2019) as "a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction" (p. 9). It is more than mere data collection that can be utilized in service improvement, it is taking personal data and turning it into a marketable commodity in the hands of tech companies, where human actions including what someone has searched online, the interactivity with their social media, where they are located on a map, or have made internet purchases are all commodified. According to Zuboff, surveillance capitalism is a drastic difference compared to the historic forms of capitalism. In conventional capitalism, business undergoes direct exchange of goods or services using money but in the case of surveillance capitalism, the business makes profits by altering human behavior through analytics and harvesting of data. These companies such as Google, Facebook, and Amazon harvest so much data to create a behavior profile, which forecasts and conditions user behavior.

The difference is that what makes surveillance capitalism unique is that it is covert. In traditional capitalism, the exchanges are explicit and known to the involved parties but in surveillance capitalism, the parties are not aware of their contributions to the system through their online processes. Zuboff (2019) explains that the data collected is not just used for providing services but also to predict and control future behavior, with personal information being sold to advertisers, political campaigns, and other entities. This type of economic activity reduces people to their cogs in a much bigger machine as the tech giants start gaining access to making serious decisions and control actions of people.

Behavioral Surplus as The Core Resource of Surveillance Capitalism

One of the most important concepts in surveillance capitalism is 'behavioral surplus,' a term coined by Zuboff (2019) to define the data collected beyond what is necessary to provide a service. Initially, data collected was used by firms to improve the user experience but subsequently, this has come to mean collecting unnecessary data which is later sold out. In behavioral surplus are specific data on the preferences, psychological markers, and online

patterns of behavior. Zuboff (2019) describes it as "the free-floating data extracted from our daily experiences, online interactions, and consumption patterns, all of which are used to create predictive products" (p. 81). This overflowing information is not only passive: it forms future decisions, behaviors, and preferences. With the use of user behavioral surplus in commercial application, there is a transition between data collection to actual control of user behavior.

Zuboff (2019) highlights that this surplus data is used to create predictive algorithms that guide consumer choices, social interactions, and even political opinions. Although the users perceive themselves to be making an independent choice, the process is actually happening under the hands of algorithms that are manipulating the actions. The more individual an experience is the less people are conscious concerning manipulation. Zuboff (2019) says, "the more personalized the experience, the less individuals recognize the ways in which their behavior is being engineered" (p. 108). This maneuver does not only include a financial plan on behalf of the companies but also a social change which has major effects on personal freedom and privacy.

The Covert Influence of Surveillance Capitalism: Instrumentarian Power

Central to surveillance capitalism is the concept of 'instrumentarian power,' Zuboff (2019) defines as "the power to shape the conditions under which individuals make decisions, shaping what they see, what they believe, and what they choose to do" (p. 245). Instrumentarian power is control that does not act by deploying force directly but by shaping the sphere of decision-making. This is a more or less paternalistic form of power that we express in the form of prediction algorithms that govern what they see, hear and experience on the internet. As an example, in social media platforms, such as Facebook and Google, the content is presented to them on a personalized level, based on their action, friction, and prior engagement.

What is so shocking about instrumentarian power is its invisibility Zuboff (2019) argues, "Instrumentarian power is a form of invisible, unaccountable control that affects every aspect of life, from what people see on social media to how they vote in elections" (p. 250). Unlike the conventional power structures that people can see and detect, instrumentarian power is subtle; hence, people have little chances of opposing its existence and impact. The power gives the tech companies the opportunities to influence behaviors without the individuals knowing the scope of influence algorithms and predictive analytics have on their choices.

The Erosion of Privacy and the Commodification of Data

One of the major effects of the surveillance capitalism concept is loss of privacy. Zuboff (2019) asserts that "privacy is no longer a matter of personal choice, but a strategic asset that is increasingly controlled by corporations" (p. 113). In the information era, the commoditization of personal data has existed in form of selling, buying, and trading information by tech industries. Privacy as a natural human right has been reduced into a commodity to be exchanged and people have lost the control over their personal information. It is a subversive form of commodification of personal information which detracts individual autonomy and freedom because the company may use their data to manipulate behavior all the time.

Zuboff (2019) believes that surveillance capitalism will prosper because it removes the privacy and turns people into objects to monitor, observe, and manage for profit. The potential to predict and control individual behavior to a greater extent than is possible in traditional marketing is realized as companies gather massive personal data. Zuboff (2019) points out that "big amounts of data made it possible for corporations to predict and control behavior of individuals" (p. 125). The loss of privacy poses serious consequences to the democratic process since people lose their independence, and social restrictions profoundly increase.

Political Implications of Surveillance Capitalism

There are severe implications to political systems and democracy in surveillance capitalism. Zuboff (2019) argues that surveillance capitalism is "the most threatening risk for democracy

because it functions through manipulating public discourse" (p. 289). The leverage of the personal data also reaches into the realms of influencing the masses, and even politics. The examination of personal data enables tech firms to target people with highly specific political adverts, which affects their political-voting patterns and views. The problems of data-driven political manipulation are evidenced by the use of algorithms to target specific voters during elections.

Zuboff (2019) warns that the rise of surveillance capitalism marks a fundamental shift in how political decisions are made. "Political campaigns, once centered on ideas and debates, are now dominated by data-driven tactics that focus on manipulating behavior rather than engaging in democratic discourse" (p. 310). The increasing role of data in making the political decisions of the day is a development that presents the drift toward the end of approaching a participatory democracy and the emergence of an election-manipulated system. This tendency negatively affects the democratic process as they turn the debate regarding politics to the control of the behavior, instead of an idea and policy debate.

Results and Discussion

Surveillance Capitalism in *The Circle*

Shoshana Zuboff coined the term surveillance capitalism to explain the new business paradigm utilising corporate data gathering to mine personal data with which to target consumer behaviour. The concept shows how the companies such as Google, Facebook and Amazon capitalise on human interactions by collecting and analysing data into funds. Surveillance capitalism works on a continuous basis of data collection not only because it eases the interaction with the customers but also because it can predict and project human behavior. This new economic machine changed the way people perceive the modern world of digital privacy and the autonomy of human beings.

The data practices of the platforms help companies generate profits by modifying the behavior of its users and changing their decisions. The conversion of the data into commodities that are exchanged on the market removes the lines between the free choices and the automatic actions of the companies. The impacts of surveillance capitalism are extensive due to the fact that it is influencing the consumer choices and raising significant concerns about digital surveillance and the right to privacy of the citizen along with the dominance of commerce over the individuals. The main theme in *The Circle* by Dave Eggers is that of surveillance capitalism since it illuminates the workings of power structures and manipulative factors in contemporary digital society. The concept of surveillance capitalism can be perceived in the context of the novel, and the analytical framework can provide insight into the impacts of technology on economic conditions, personal relations, and social spheres, and hence leads to questioning the individual permission and liberty. The story identifies the implications of the use of corporate surveillance to shape and control behavior and create social norms in the contemporary society.

The Role of Behavioral Surplus

Zuboff (2019) defines behavioral surplus as "the free-floating data extracted from our daily experiences, online interactions, and consumption patterns, all of which are used to create predictive products" (p. 144). The extra- data not needed to maximize service delivery becomes an instrument that shapes and alters future behavioural patterns. *The Circle* shows its increasing influence over the actions of the characters by means of stimulating the use of superfluous information and Mae Holland is its primary goal. Mae through her Circle ecology experience shows that behavioral surplus is an active manipulation that organizations have developed to alter human behavior. The moment *The Circle* nudges Mae Holland into increasingly deeper engagement her full range of activities turn into company-accumulated information. Mae is shown to have zero insight on how much the platform dictates her actions. As an example, once Mae begins to wear the SeeChange camera and document her every move, she thinks she is

taking control of the situation by being wholly transparent. The perceptions of people highly depend on the processes that have been coded by the algorithms of the company. Mae comments, "I'm just trying to help, I'm trying to get the word out, to connect, to make the world a better place" (Eggers, 2013, p. 239).

The statement, however, reveals Mae has a sense of ownership and in doing so, shows how the company influences her behavior by instilling the behavioral surplus. *The Circle* has accumulated information of her movements in going about her business as they actively reorganize her actions according to their ideals of the organization hence creating a false sense of autonomy and control. As Mae becomes more engrossed into the systems within *The Circle*, she is able to see quite clearly how the decisions of fellow humans are directed by unseen forces. Zuboff (2019) argues that behavioral surplus is "the hidden force that drives not just advertising, but also the personalized experiences that users have on platforms like Facebook, Google, and Amazon" (p. 95). Mae gets more and more dependence on the technology as the source of validation and guidance which depicts the subtle underlying power. She is also keen to take part in *The Circle* program (a shaped supporting layer), TruYou that removes anonymity and is also convinced that this increases democratic deliberation. *The Circle* induces this credence by collecting personal information about her on anything she does in the platform.

Mae becomes more frequently dependent on the validation system of *The Circle* as she transforms. Annie hears Mae profess that life in *The Circle* state is better than it was individually before the increasing dominance of the firm. Things are much better around *The Circle* because of the present state of affairs. The purpose of Mae is determined by the system which monitors her relationships, as well as her output of data. Since Mae feels empowered but she does not have ultimate control over her decisions as algorithms keep influencing her decisions. Zuboff (2019) assertion that "the more personalized the experience, the less individuals recognize the ways in which their behavior is being engineered" (p. 108) is vividly portrayed in Mae's journey. The personalized sense of choosing power she has over her decisions reveals the story of what happens when human action is moved to be controlled as her choices never get full exemption of being controlled.

Mae exemplifies a gradual embrace of Circle ethos as she increases the intensity of her participation in the mission of the company, which is to drive away secrecy and institute comprehensive openness. At one point, she notes that sharing is not after her own interest since she contributes information to be taken by all community members. I am sharing with all. This will be the future state of affairs. Here lies my reason for being chosen by *The Circle*" (Eggers,2013, p. 156). The quote shows that Mae is willing to go along with the ideology of *The Circle* of being extremely transparent in her life because she considers herself a member of the movement of total openness associated with the company. However, she voluntarily decides to post all the parts of her life even downtimes, this can be attributed to the kind of a system that has moulded her into thinking what it means to be really free. By gathering unlimited amounts of data and its subsequent influence on the decision process, Mae feels that she is gaining power yet she is blinded to the real source of this power.

In her life among *The Circle* Mae experiences the entirety of what behavior surplus is like due to the many feedback systems she comes across. Whenever she shares personal information with other people or gets positive comments by the users it makes small changes in her conduct to repeat the same phenomena. The psychological impact of behavioral surplus is depicted in how Mae becomes more and more obsessed with her score, how she has to do better performing on *The Circle* platform by being more open and transparent, that is to say, visible. As Mae says, "My score should remain high and higher because I know the implication" (Eggers, 2013, p. 286). The system that helped Mae in developing her self esteem in the form of the high score that Mae is determined to maintain shows that the system had

become part of her identity. The feedback loop that the platform helps to maintain has now become a defining quality of her actions as well as making her a perfect guinea pig in exhibiting disconcerting behaviors of behavioral surplus.

The way in which Mae becomes increasingly dependent on *The Circle* and increasingly adopted of the principles explains behavioral surplus. Mae no longer exists as a unique person and is the reflection of the data-driven controlling mechanism that governs her practice. There comes a decisive scene when Mae confronts Frank who observes her habits of robotic behaviors, which are proven by the dialogue. "*The Circle* has transformed Mae into someone who represents their system rather than her original self" (Eggers, 2013, p. 339). It identifies the extent to which the system has stripped Mae of herself in this sentence that illustrates the loss of agency to the character. The way Mae moves teaches Zuboff that every step that she takes reflects what the platform expects her to do.

Instrumentarian Power and the Erosion of Privacy

The instrumentarian power does not operate in the same manner as conventional power structures because it creates the situation in which individuals make decisions but in a manner that escapes direct attention. Zuboff (2019) defines this power as "It is the influence which forces individuals to shape their decisions subconsciously" (p. 245). *The Circle* operates predictive algorithms that rely on large compilation of personal data in order to influence decisions of users instrumentarian power which is an essential factor in the book.

The Circle means that decisions are made about Mae Holland without her knowing through instrumentarian power. The extent of Circle services Mae uses illustrates how the data centric companies' systems slowly come to direct her decisions and choices. On Mae finds it easy to choose how she wants to interact with her Circle until she comes to terms that her decisions are informed by data collection loops and predictive software algorithms. In the example that she experiences Mae comes into contact with instrumentarian power in the manner that forces that she cannot see are controlling what she sees, thinks and does without her knowledge. Mae claims that she has control over her personal decision as she phrased it, that despite the benefits of the action to her person she made a conscious decision to act.

The feeling of self-determination provokes instrumentarian power which makes people develop this thought. Mae believes that she has freedom to make her own decisions but this notion is slightly marred by algorithms that dictate the content that she is exposed to as well as the social relations. Zuboff (2019) writes, "Instrumentarian power is invisible force which affects every aspect of life including how they vote in elections" (p. 250). Mae gets densely dependent on Circle technology but does not consider how much she is defined by algorithms in determining her action patterns across the network. The instrumentarian power in *The Circle* acts in a hidden but wide-ranged manner by dictating the decisions Mae made which are not within her conscious domain. Mae exposes total transparency in her life to other circle users because she feels it constitutes personal power when she is at her peak of participating in society. Zuboff (2019) warns that "Instrumentarian power is dangerous because it works invisibly and individuals rarely aware of the power through which their choices are made" (p. 253). The predictive algorithms that are present in *The Circle* make it hard to recognize the power of the organization since Mae is so deeply immersed in its system. As Mae becomes fully committed to the company she states, "My objective is to achieve transparency while becoming a member of this broader system" (Eggers, 2013, p. 381). At this stage the readers appreciate that Mae has all concepts of transparency since it is all the system of *The Circle* since Zuboff states that instrumentarian power can work in the realm that is not even fully understood by users.

By application of soft systems, company keeps the domination over the decisions of Mae in *The Circle* through unsuspicious mechanisms. As Mae works her way through the data-

based environment of *The Circle* her autonomy gradually gets curbed by the predictive algorithmic system of *The Circle*. Realistic surveillance loss of privacy itself can be traced in this novel by Dave Eggers: *The Circle*. This loss of privacy can be tied directly to the concept of surveillance capitalism as understood by Shoshana Zuboff. Zuboff (2019) asserts that "privacy is no longer a matter of personal choice, but a strategic asset that is increasingly controlled by corporations" (p. 114). By representing the example of *The Circle*, the novel exhibits the fact that privacy acts as a consumer good, and users can voluntarily give it to gain access to the services offered by the company. The character of Mae Holland allows Eggers to reflect on the privacy costs that are imposed by this shift in which the personal information is seen as an asset that is utilized by the company to trace people.

In the process of developing her growing relationships to *The Circle*, Mae also experiences the loss of her own privacy. Mae is not trusting initially but she comes around to follow the dogmas of the company as it relates to transparence. Mae pursues a gradual way that transforms her into a person who is a subject of 24/7 surveillance. Mae went through the procedures of compulsory information distribution through the corporate systems in the initial days at *The Circle* by exposing every aspect of her professional demeanor to personal thoughts. This idea touches on what Mae believes in transparency as the determinant of virtue in that the company creates an environment of transparency that motivates sharing among its individuals, according to her, when one is transparent, he is clean. She says "It is all a matter of transparency" (Eggers, 2013, p. 256).

Mae sees it fit that she exposes all of her life to the company as a source of empowerment. The need to rely on *The Circle* indicates how this core belief turns out to be the destructive outcomes to her. Zuboff (2019) emphasizes that privacy has shifted from a right to a "currency traded between companies" (p. 117). With the increasing relationship with *The Circle* Mae, Mae realizes how its personal information has shifted segues not as a personal but as something the organization exploits as a commercial one. *The Circle* uses Mae in various ways as she advances through the system as they continue to expand control over her. Her emotional reactions are formed up by more and more of her behavior and preferences that are preset by the company algorithms. Zuboff (2019) assertion that "Surveillance Capitalism thrives on the erosion of privacy, turning individuals into objects to be monitored, measured, and controlled" (p. 121). When denying her previous boundaries of personal privacy and becoming the open book of *The Circle*, Mae comments on the fact that she takes this situation in stride when she says, "Although my privacy is now totally gone I readily accept it. I decide this" (Eggers, 2013, p. 201).

Mae becomes willing to share all personal information to benefit the society since she is unable to judge how influential the company becomes in her decision-making and behavior. Privacy conversion into a commercial good creates unequal power relations that exist between commercial organizations and the customers. The aspects mentioned above result in *The Circle* having controlling powers as the technology is used extensively by Mae in her day-to-day routines like sending messages and emails to her friends and family members. The company influences Mae by using prognostic algorithms to inform her of decisions involving its business interest after which she feels empowered but no longer under her own control.

The final result of this process is when the program that Mae is taking part in through the company named See Change is perceived as the symbolic embodiment of the way the privacy had been turned into an object of commodification. Mae sacrifices her personal privacy in her use of live broadcasted cameras since other people purchase copies of her personal moments broadcasted to the world. It shows how surveillance systems exercise power disparities that allow individuals like Mae to relinquish traceable data control so as to shape their day-to-day routines. Mae herself states, "Having freedom goes beyond hiding things, it

means being liberated from whatever exists independently of sharing" (Eggers, 2013, p. 293). Mae, in her statement, shows how what *The Circle* is supposed to be freedom is in fact the oppression of her identity which she cannot abandon. By sacrificing her privacy, she does not become free but meekly finds her own place under the control of the corporation.

Political Consequences of Surveillance Capitalism in *The Circle*

Zuboff (2019) describes surveillance capitalism as "dangerous because it uses surveillance data to disrupt democracy through public sphere manipulation" (p. 289). *The Circle* demonstrates the notion that the usage of the private information to influence the mass of people and control the political dialogue leads to the development of decisions made on the base of managing human behavior rather than an actual debate. *The Circle* leverages its access to large user data in order to point political attitudes and behavior of its users through the novel. The personal data which *The Circle* obtains enables such system to construct particular messages that stimulate the political decisions of the users without them having detailed information. In the mission of *The Circle* Mae Holland volunteers to support the endeavor of the organization to create a complete social sharing system where political thoughts and convictions can be shared. In the course of her profound involvement with the ideology of Circle, Mae quotes these thoughts to herself in her mind: "I'm doing this for everyone. In the larger interest The goal of the matter is that everyone learns about everything. It's all about the truth" (Eggers, 2013, p. 394).

Using this statement, Mae demonstrates her commitments to the development of *The Circle* model that integrates personal review with political activism since it paves the way to collective good despite the widespread influence of the company over the lives of the individuals and oppression of their ideas. Through *The Circle* we observe a system whose performance to one end is on such a form of political content targeting akin to what surveillance corporations remain today at the present. The workers at the company such as Mae are engaged in an un ceasing information intake that corresponds to personal interest levels, but at the same time serve to guide political orientations in specific directions. As a result of her increasing access to Circle political information, Mae demonstrates that data-driven methods of political discourse disintegrate the existence of productive political discourse between people thereby preventing reasonable and open dialogue among citizens.

Zuboff (2019) further cautions that this transformation in the decision-making process of politics represents a profound alteration in the nature of democracy itself, "Political campaigns, once centered on ideas and debates, are now dominated by data-driven tactics that focus on manipulating behavior rather than engaging in democratic discourse" (p. 310). In the same way Zuboff discussed the capability of algorithmic control to replace genuine interaction of people in democratic processes, in *The Circle* the author illustrates such concerns through its power to control user's content. This phenomenon is also evident in the political actions of Mae since the company has powerful algorithms that instruct her political views after thorough analysis of data.

Surveillance capitalism comes with serious political consequences which are manifested in *The Circle*. The story warns the audience of the way in which the companies in technology gain dominion to engineer the customer consumption rates and their effects on the politics. It is a story of how Mae increasingly relies on Circle presentation in order to criticize the dangers of large-scale surveillance capitalism on democracy in political systems. The mechanism of manipulative voting and political activity based on the application of algorithms in the modern world is considered a threat to democratic rights and freedoms since in this way, the agency of individual freedom is automatically replaced by the agency of corporate power.

Conclusion

In sum, *The Circle* is a critique of surveillance capitalism, a term coined by Shoshana Zuboff, which highlights how the extraction of data by corporations is deeply affecting human action in terms of its behavior, privacy and autonomous decision-making processes. The novel is an illustration of how leading technology companies like *The Circle* can use personal information to intervene in consumer decision-making and behavior, to make people objects of control and provide them with the semblance of openness and control. The novel represents behavioral surplus through the person of Mae Holland, who is reduced to a shell of a human being under the constant pressure of being controlled in subtle yet powerful ways called instrumentarian power because it is always about predicting and predictively modifying actions and subjected to an inappropriately reserved series of consequences. This is a form of power that is invisible and works against people with the predictive algorithms that recreate personal identities and decision-making activities as people unwittingly adjust to corporate agendas. In addition, the novel has shown how the incorporation of privacy as a basic human right is becoming a negotiable asset that is traded in exchange of corporate capital resulting in the loss of freedom and surveillance becoming normalized. Furthermore, *The Circle* highlights political implication of surveillance capitalism in which the consumer behaviors are not the only areas of data manipulation, but also the political sectors, which may disintegrate the democratic systems and the discussions. With its account of a society dominated by data-driven technologies, *The Circle* is a cautionary tale against the power of corporations left unchecked, and the potential cost to the rights of the individual in an increasingly technological society. The novel brings up urgently needed questions regarding the future of human agency under the auspices of surveillance capitalism by critically engaging with Zuboff's theoretical framework.

References

Aardema, J. (2014). *The not-yet of gender equality: The representation of gender in dystopian literature*. Retrieved from https://studenttheses.uu.nl/handle/20.500.12932/18750

Brunon-Ernst, A. (2016). *Beyond Foucault: New perspectives on Bentham's panopticon*. Routledge.

Eggers, D. (2013). *The Circle: A novel*. Vintage Books.

Hobbs, P. (2017). "You willingly tie yourself to these leashes": Neoliberalism, neoliberal rationality, and the corporate workplace in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*. *Dandelion: Postgraduate Arts Journal and Research Network, 8*(1), 192–205.

İşık, D. (2020). A Foucauldian reading of Dave Eggers' *The Circle*. *Journal of Modernism and Postmodernism Studies (JOMOPS), 1*(2), 154–162.

Khan, N. H. (2024). Digital panopticon and shattered self: Unveiling AI surveillance in Dave Eggers's *The Circle*. *Pakistan Languages and Humanities Review, 8*(3), 791–797.

Lyon, D. (2018). *The culture of surveillance: Watching as a way of life*. John Wiley & Sons.

Maurer, K., & Rostbøll, C. F. (2020). Demoxie: Reflections on digital democracy in Dave Eggers's novel *The Circle*. *First Monday, 25*(5), 155–170.

McKenna, P. J., III. (2023). Meet the new boss: Dave Eggers's *The Circle* and the new digital totalitarianism. *College Literature, 50*(1), 87–115.

Mathew, D. S. (2020). Surveillance society: Panopticon in the age of digital media. *The New Polis.*

Paramagururaj, S., & Subha, M. (2023). Foucauldian power in *The Circle* by Dave Eggers. *Jordan Journal of Modern Languages & Literatures, 15*(1), 365–375.

Rana, S. (2021). Normalizing surveillance in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*. *Cultural Logic: A Journal of Marxist Theory & Practice, 25*, 72–88.

Saudi, T. T. (2024). Unveiling data colonialism: A critical examination of surveillance, power, and information control in *The Circle* by Dave Eggers. *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences.*

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. PublicAffairs.