Dave Eggers’s “The Circle” Fails as Satire, Succeeds as Prophecy

**By** [**Wade Roush**](http://www.xconomy.com/author/wroush/)July 25th, 2014

When the anti-utopian book *The Circle*, the latest novel from *McSweeney’s* founder Dave Eggers, came out last October, reviewers hailed it as a “provocative” and “foreboding” warning about the spiritual costs of excessive sharing and transparency on the Internet. *The Guardian* even [called it](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/09/circle-dave-eggers-review) “a deft modern synthesis of Swiftian wit with Orwellian prognostication.”

But for a satire or a fable to be effective, in the way that *Gulliver’s Travels* or *1984* were, its characters and situations must usually bear some resemblance to those we know. They can’t depart entirely from reality.

So my concern grew as I made my way deeper and deeper into *The Circle* this week and found so little that I recognized. Set in a near future where a single, unreasonably successful social media company has displaced Google, Facebook, PayPal, and just about every other Internet giant in the Bay Area, the novel is clearly intended as social commentary. Its protagonist starts out as a customer service agent at the Circle, whose campus in the fictional East Bay city of San Vincenzo is “on land that had once been a shipyard, then a drive-in movie theater, then a flea market, then blight” but is now a green, hilly heaven. It’s obviously a riff on the Googleplex, with a dash of Sun Quentin, Facebook’s campus in Menlo Park.

But that’s pretty much where the similarities to real-world Internet companies end. All of the mid- to high-level employees of the Circle speak in a cheerful yet manipulative way that might be common at TED and the Aspen Ideas Conference but which I’ve never heard, in four years as a technology reporter covering Silicon Valley, from actual Facebook or Google employees. Mae Holland, the main character, is an implausibly naïve Leni Riefenstahl type who’s fallen under the spell of the Circle’s founders and actually believes the self-serving maxims they engrave in steel, like SECRETS ARE LIES. SHARING IS CARING. PRIVACY IS THEFT.

There is, I’ll admit, one Eggers zinger in the book that rings true. At the Circle, one disillusioned character comments, there’s “enough money to make any dumb idea real.” The fictional company’s silly side projects, like counting every grain of sand in the Sahara, come off as valid parodies in a decade when Google has sunk untold sums into [moonshot ideas](http://www.forbes.com/sites/ericmack/2014/05/06/four-crazy-google-x-projects-that-failed/) like space elevators, jetpacks, hoverboards, teleportation, wireless Internet access via balloons, power from high-altitude kites, and, of course, Google Glass.

But overall, the novel fails as an incisive depiction of the real innovation culture in Silicon Valley. The technology leaders I’ve covered—people like Mark Zuckerberg, Eric Schmidt, and Marissa Mayer—are far more self-aware and far less ruthless and self-assured than the ones in the book. If Google can’t even convince people to use its social network, Google+, it’s not about to take over the functions of police departments, Congress, and the DMV, as the Circle does in the book.

So is there any reason to take the rest of this book seriously? Should *The Circle* really make us think twice about the corporate drive to turn every search query or status update into a commercial transaction, or about the modern habit of chronicling our lives through an unending stream of tweets, texts, and newsfeed posts?

Yeah, actually, it should. *The Circle* may lack believable, rounded characters and the traditional elements of a plot. (Instead, there’s a succession of enigmatic foils who pop into Mae’s life at awkward moments, like the angel Clarence in *It’s A Wonderful Life*, offering chances at redemption as her projects and ideas draw her closer to the Circle’s dark inner circle; the tension is around whether she’ll take them.) Nonetheless, the book is entertaining, and gets across some powerful reminders, to wit: technology alone is never the solution to a social problem; tagging someone in a Facebook post isn’t a substitute for making a true emotional connection; you can’t have an inner life if there’s no sacred boundary between inner and outer. And yes, even a flimsy novel can use the mechanisms of fiction to make social point in a more memorable and effective way than an essay. Certainly, Eggers’s novel is more invigorating than other recent books that make essentially the same points, like Jaron Lanier’s *Who Owns the Future?* or Evgeny Morozov’s *To Save Everything, Click Here*.

And recent events show that Eggers is a canny observer of Silicon Valley technology, if not always of the people who build it. In the novel, one of the Circle’s innovations is a system of small, wireless, high-definition, Internet-connected video cameras called SeeChange—not to be confused with the real San Francisco-based health insurance company of the same name. The company frames the technology as a step toward greater knowledge and transparency. Who wouldn’t want to be able to check the weather conditions before driving all the way to Stinson Beach to go surfing, or monitor their pet or an ailing parent from their phone or their desk at work? And in a world where every action is recorded, wouldn’t there be fewer opportunities for misbehavior?

Until recently, it would have been easy to laugh off such questions as science-fiction rhetoric. (In the book, Mae’s shame over being caught stealing on camera becomes the final bit of leverage the company needs to draw her fully to the dark side.)

But then Google’s home-devices subsidiary, Nest, purchased Dropcam, a maker of—you guessed it—small, wireless, high-definition, Internet-connected video cameras. Now, I know the founders of Dropcam, and they’re decent guys who take privacy seriously. And Nest promises that the cloud-stored data recorded by its cameras won’t be shared with anyone, including Google, without the owner’s permission. But Nest is already taking steps to open up its other devices, a thermostat and a smoke detector, to interact with software from Google partners and Google itself. It’s only a matter of time before home video monitoring gets looped into the larger “smart home” vision that is a growing obsession at Google, Apple, and other leading mobile, Internet, and hardware companies.

It doesn’t matter whether Google Now or Siri is the user interface for the smart home. Once every gadget, appliance, video camera, home heating and cooling system, and self-driving car is tied together, Internet companies will have access to a frightening amount of data about our movements through the physical world, not just the virtual one. And if Google has the information, it’s only safe to assume in the post-Snowden era that the National Security Agency has it too. (That’s how “We’re not Google” is becoming a sales pitch for some technology companies, as Xconomy’s Curt Woodward [explained in a recent piece](http://www.xconomy.com/national/2014/06/25/dont-want-google-in-your-house-some-home-tech-startups-to-watch/).)

I’m grateful to Eggers for writing *The Circle*. It doesn’t work perfectly as a novel. But it’s the most engaging distillation yet of the real and profound issues we should be debating at a time when the technologies of always-on connectivity, social-media oversharing, data mining, algorithmic decision-making, total surveillance, and the national security state are converging. A single book like *The Circle* probably won’t drive you off the grid, but it may make you think more carefully about how you connect to it.

<http://www.xconomy.com/national/2014/07/25/dave-eggers-the-circle-fails-as-satire-succeeds-as-prophecy/>