

World Without Privacy

In his great and prophetic novel 1984, George Orwell laid out his vision of what totalitarianism would look like if taken to its logical extreme. The government – in the form of Big Brother – sees all and knows all. The Party rewrites the past and controls the present. Heretics pop up on television screens so they can be denounced by the populace. And the Ministry of Truth propagates the Party's three slogans:

WAR IS PEACE.

FREEDOM IS SLAVERY.

IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH.

Dave Eggers' new novel, *The Circle*, also has three short, Orwellian slogans, and while I have no special insight into whether he consciously modeled *The Circle* on 1984, I do know that his book could wind up being every bit as prophetic.

Eggers' subject is what the loss of privacy would look like if taken to its logical extreme. His focus is not on government but on the technology companies who invade our privacy on a daily basis. *The Circle*, you see, is a Silicon Valley company, an evil hybrid of Google, Facebook, and Twitter, whose cultures – the freebies, the workaholism, the faux friendliness – Eggers captures with only slight exaggeration.

The Circle has enormous power because it has become the primary gateway to the Internet. Thanks to its near-monopoly, it is able to collect reams of data about everyone who uses its services – and many who don't – data that allows *The Circle* to track anyone down in a matter of minutes. It has begun planting small, hidden cameras in various places – to reduce crime, its leaders insist.

The Circle wants to place chips in children to prevent abductions, it says. It has called on governments to be "transparent," by which it means that legislators should wear a tiny camera that allows the world to watch their every move. Eventually, legislators who refuse find themselves under suspicion – after all, they must be hiding something. This is where *The Circle's* logic leads.

Of course, nobody who works for *The Circle* thinks what he or she is doing is evil.

On the contrary, like many a real Silicon Valley executive, they view themselves as visionaries, whose only goal is benign: to make the world a better place.

“We’re at the dawn of the Second Enlightenment,” says one of The Circle’s founders in a speech to the staff. “I’m talking about an era where we don’t allow the majority of human thought and action and achievement and learning to escape as if from a leaky bucket.”

It believes if it can eliminate secrecy people will be forced to be their best selves all the time. It even toys with the idea of getting the government to require voters to use The Circle – to force them to vote on Election Day. And, of course, it has found multiple ways to monetize the data it collects. As for the potential downside of this loss of privacy, it is waved away by Circle executives as if too trifling to even consider.

Is this vision of the future far-fetched? Of course, it is – though no more than 1984 was. The Circle imagines where we could end up if we don’t begin paying attention. Indeed, what is striking is how far down this road we have already gone. Thanks to Edward Snowden, we know that the National Security Agency has the ability to read our emails and listen to our phone calls. Google shows us ads based on words we use in our Gmail accounts.

Last week, Facebook – which has, in shades of Orwell, a chief privacy officer – removed a privacy setting so that any Facebook user can search for any other Facebook user. The next day, Google unveiled a plan that would make it possible for the company to use its customers’ words and likeness in ads for products they like – information that Google knows because, well, Google knows everything.

So, yes, while we’re not in Eggers territory yet, we are getting closer. I don’t have either a Facebook or a Twitter account, yet every few days I get an email from one of the two companies saying that so-and-so is waiting for me to join them in social media land. The people it picks as my potential “friends” are very often people with whom I’ve never been a true colleague, but I’ve briefly met at some point in my life. It is creepy to me that the companies know that I know these particular people.

“If you have something that you don’t want anyone to know,” Eric Schmidt, the former chief executive of Google, once said, “maybe you shouldn’t be doing it in the first place.” That line could easily have been uttered by one of Dave Eggers’

characters. That is the thought process that could someday cost us our last shred of privacy. The Circle is a warning.

(And in case you're wondering, here are The Circle's three slogans:

SHARING IS CARING.

SECRETS ARE LIES.

PRIVACY IS THEFT.)

Source: <https://www.tampabay.com/archive/2013/10/16/world-without-privacy/>
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