

**“Secrets are Lies:” Academic Libraries and the Corporate Control of Privacy in
the Age of Commercial Social Media: A Reading of Dave Eggers’ *The Circle***

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My work on social media and libraries started four or five years ago with this question: what does it mean for libraries to establish a presence within the proprietary spaces of commercially-owned and –controlled social media? My initial attempts to think about this question focused on the restrictive license agreements used by social media companies, on issues surrounding the enclosure of the digital commons, and on the forms of participation permitted on social media platforms (Lilburn 2012). At the time, the dominant rhetoric surrounding social media was positive and optimistic: social media tools and platforms were described as open and user-centered and emphasis was placed on how sites such as Facebook and Twitter can empower individuals and communities and promote greater interaction and participation. Within LIS, much of the literature on social media was focused on the popularity and perceived benefits of the tools and left unexamined the fact that many of the 2.0 tools being adopted by libraries are owned by companies that track and monitor user behavior and then use this information for their own purposes and profit. Also largely absent from the LIS literature was consideration of how the same tools that empower individuals also empower governments and corporations.

This situation is beginning to change. The Snowden revelations have directed greater media attention to issues related to surveillance and privacy, and recent work in LIS has started to pay greater attention to threats to patron privacy

posed by Web 2.0 tools and services. A recent library conference (LACUNY) on privacy and surveillance held in New York City, for example, included a number of speakers who addressed issues relating to social media use in libraries. With this paper, I'm interested in investigating the impact that library adoption of commercial social media may have on the role the library plays in protecting patron privacy and defending intellectual freedom. As Michael Zimmer recently wrote, libraries have traditionally strived to ensure "free and unfettered access to information" in an environment where patrons are "provided the means to read, inquire and learn free from undue oversight or threats of surveillance" ("Patron Privacy" 55). But, Zimmer argues, Web 2.0 "threatens to disrupt these norms" (55). I'm interested in exploring the implications such a disruption may mean for libraries and, in particular, for the role the library can play in the development of critical and engaged citizens. I begin my discussion by turning to a work of fiction which, I wish to suggest, offers insight on a number of issues relating to libraries, social media and privacy.

In his novel, *The Circle*, published in 2013, Dave Eggers imagines the social, cultural and political implications of the tools and services offered by what has quickly become the world's most powerful Internet company, the Circle. With the development of its Unified Operating System, TruYou, a system that "subsumed Facebook, Twitter, Google" (23) and just about everything online that had previously been separate, and SeeChange, a world-spanning video surveillance system designed to make everyone "all seeing" and "all knowing" (71), the Circle changes not only the Internet but, by the novel's end, amasses unrivaled power and

influence over just about every aspect of life and society. The company's philosophy that "secrets are lies" and "privacy is theft" (305) and its ultimate goal of complete transparency (386), have far-reaching and transformative effects on society, including on individuals who decline participation in Circle services.

In *Fictions Inc.*, an exploration of the representation of the corporation in American literature and film, Ralph Clare argues that the central struggle at the heart of a number of recent creative works is the "waning of democracy and the nation state's sovereignty against the transnational power of corporations and capital" (1). This struggle is very much evident in Eggers' novel. As Margaret Atwood observed in the *New York Review of Books*, *The Circle* is a novel about the "social construction and deconstruction of privacy, [...] the increasing corporate ownership of privacy, and about the effects such ownership may have on the nature of Western democracy." The Circle's impact on the nature of democracy is perhaps most vividly illustrated late in the novel when the company rolls out Demoxie, its plan to require every voting-age citizen to have a Circle account and to participate in civic elections via the Circle. The initial idea – to use the Circle's technology to make it easier for citizens to register to vote – is framed in the language of efficiency and cost savings, but Demoxie quickly escalates into something more. By the time it's ready to launch, Demoxie has morphed into a system that would make it possible to poll citizens on any number of issues, at any time, and to require an immediate response. Voting will be mandatory and individuals' accounts frozen until they provide the Circle with their input. In other words, what begins as an idea to make the running of elections more efficient, turns into a system that, in the words of one

Circle senior executive, could eliminate Congress and much of Washington (395). Of course, it would also eliminate any opportunity for informed deliberation, since responses to questions would be required immediately.

With *Demoxie*, Eggers explores not only issues of privacy and citizen autonomy, but of corporate control of information and the privatization of government functions and services, and ultimately, the processes through which democracy is understood and managed. *Demoxie* also highlights the novel's concern with the Internet as politically contested space, about surveillance as a form of power, and about the implications of growing imbalances of power and privilege in society. Throughout the novel, inequities regarding the erosion of personal privacy become increasingly evident. Employees of the Circle have the contents of their laptops and phones uploaded to the cloud and company servers, they are monitored, tracked, ranked, and profiled, but the complete transparency promoted and enforced by the company, ostensibly for the good of democracy and a safe and secure society, is never adopted by the powerful men who run the company. Their plans and strategies, like the proprietary code underlying the Circle's systems, remains private. *The Circle* is a novel about the loss and privatization of privacy, but it's also a novel about secrets, and about the imbalances in power and privilege that determine who gets to keep a secret and maintain privacy.

The novel's main character is Mae Holland, a 24 year-old recent university graduate who begins working at the Circle after a brief and unfulfilling stint at the public utility in her hometown. Early on, it's clear that Mae values her privacy and is skeptical of services that infringe on her ability to keep certain things about herself

to herself. A scene early in the novel, in which Mae responds with “shock and horror” (121) when personal information about herself is revealed during the launch of a new Circle dating app, is indicative of her attitudes towards privacy. Gradually, however, Mae adjusts her attitudes and behaviors so that they are more in line with the company’s expectations of her. She comes to accept and adopt as her own the company’s views on privacy and is among the first at the Circle to agree to go fully transparent – to wear a camera around her neck which broadcasts her every move and every conversation live online. She also comes to accept the view that rapidly diminishing expectations of personal privacy is an inevitability that cannot be resisted.

A discussion of the reasons for the transformation of Mae’s opinions about privacy would require more time than I have here today, but it’s worth noting that she never really questions the company rhetoric and leaves unchallenged its claims about the benefits its programs and services will yield. In particular, Mae never considers how the company’s rhetoric ignores or masks inequities in power. When Bailey, one of the Circle’s three senior executives, shares his vision of a society where everyone is watched and everyone can know anything about everyone else, he explains the benefits by saying that we will all be “compelled to be our best selves,” we will “have no choice but to be good” (292). Similar notions about the benefits of systems of constant surveillance are touted elsewhere in the novel, such as when a developer pitches his idea for NeighbourWatch, a system designed to sound an alarm when strangers appear and to help enforce normative behavior. Mae consistently accepts at face-value the stated benefits of these systems and fails

to take into account the implications of her company's ideas and plans. In particular, the question of who will get to decide what is acceptable or normal behavior is never addressed. In other words, Mae never considers how acts of citizenship that challenge existing distributions of power may fall outside of what is considered acceptable, normal, or good.

In *Transparent Lives: Surveillance in Canada*, a recently published book reporting on research carried out during the first half of a seven year project aimed at understanding the factors that contribute “to the expansion of surveillance as a technology of governance” (“About Transparent Lives”), Colin Bennett, Kevin Haggerty, David Lyon, and Valerie Steeves argue that oft-repeated claims about evolving social norms and the inevitability of zero-privacy are too simplistic and fail to take into consideration the “personal, social and political consequences of surveillance” (Bennett et al., 4). Throughout the novel, Mae is repeatedly presented with examples of these consequences and also of various forms of opposition to the Circle's activities. We hear of free internet advocates who wish to protect the right to remain anonymous online, of FCC hearings, of objections raised by civil liberties groups, and of plans for an antitrust task force to look into the Circle's monopoly power over the flow of information. In every case, however, Mae dismisses those who question the Circle as late adopters who will eventually give in and go along with the company's plans.

This pattern is repeated one final time late in the novel when Mae is confronted with the urgent appeals of another of the company's three senior executives who has come to recognize the dangers associated with Demoxie and the

plans to make Circle accounts mandatory. The executive, Ty, the company's "boy wonder" who created many of the Circle's early tools and services, tries to convince Mae that he never imagined a world where Circle accounts were mandatory, and where the option of opting out is over. Ty pleads with Mae to help him stop what he describes as a looming "totalitarian nightmare" (486), but Mae once again fails to take the opposition seriously.

The scene is framed as Mae's whistleblowing opportunity – her chance to finally move beyond the company rhetoric and critically assess the implications of what it will mean for one company to acquire so much power. Significantly, it's a scene that takes place underground, in secret, with Mae's camera temporarily disabled and away from the other cameras and monitoring systems. Mae's conversation with Ty, about the possibility of challenging the Circle's objectives and power, is one that could only take place in secret. It's a scene that emphasizes the role of privacy as an enabler of autonomy in democratic citizenship (Bennett et al., 176, 191) and illustrates that without privacy, there can be no civil disobedience (MacKinnon, 147-48). It is also, I would argue, a scene that brings to mind the role played by the library as a space for critical reflection, and the role the library can play as refuge and as site of resistance. It's a scene that draws attention to the importance of spaces that make it possible for citizens, individually and collectively, to engage in meaningful intellectual, social and political activity free of the technologies of governance and control and of the fear of reprisals.

In the end, *The Circle* is a novel of lost opportunity – it is a book about the whistleblower who could have been. It's also a novel about a character who

succumbs to dominant narratives about the inevitability of the erosion of personal privacy and who fails to consider the societal implications of this change with regards to citizen autonomy. Admittedly, the situation Mae faces, in an imagined near future or parallel universe where Circle accounts become mandatory is a little different from the situation we face today. Still, libraries have embraced commercial social media at a rate that seems to signal a similar acceptance of dominant rhetoric, as well as a willingness to acquiesce to the idea that erosion of privacy is a fair and necessary tradeoff for access to the perceived benefits of social media and other emerging technologies. Or perhaps it is acquiescence informed by a belief, similar to that espoused by Mae, that resistance is futile, and that those who currently object to changes in levels of personal privacy are late adopters who will eventually come around. Either way, or even if, as is more likely, neither of these speculative assertions is entirely accurate, the widespread adoption of commercial social media tools by libraries raises questions about possible impacts on patron privacy, and about what a perceived or actual diminishment in efforts to protect patron privacy may mean with regards to the library's role in helping to develop critical and engaged citizens.

In their study of the factors leading to the expansion of surveillance in society, Bennett et al., argue that the "balance of power between individuals and organizations" now "tilts perilously towards organizations" (15). Frank Pasquale, in his recent book, *Black Box Society*, uses the metaphor of a one-way mirror to describe how powerful "corporate actors have unprecedented knowledge" about our daily lives "while we know little to nothing" about how this information is used

or how it influences “decisions that we and they make” (9). Mae has bought into the idea that she cannot resist, and that there is no point in others’ attempts to resist the power of the Circle. Yet, Bennett and his co-authors conclude that “none of the trends [we are seeing today] is inevitable” (193). “Surveillance is reversible,” and “privacy is not dead” (193), they write, but we need to be aware of trends and of “our complicity in them” (192).

A review of recent scholarship on social media use in libraries could lead one to conclude that, with few exceptions, LIS has been largely disinterested in the question of possible complicity in the trends Bennett and his co-authors describe. Michael Zimmer’s recent work has identified what he describes as a “policy vacuum” on issues related to privacy and social media use in libraries (“Assessing the Treatment” 36). His review of the literature showed that only a very small minority of articles on web 2.0 discuss privacy in a meaningful way and that questions about the impact social media may have on the historical role librarians have played in protecting patron privacy remain largely unexplored (35-36).

Still, as I noted earlier, this is beginning to change. The LACUNY Conference on privacy and surveillance held in New York a few weeks ago highlighted the important activist and advocacy work of librarians and of organizations such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation and the Library Freedom Project. One presenter, Alycia Sellie, speaking not about social media but about library use of ebooks with DRM, noted that ebooks make it possible for companies to monitor and compile vast amounts of data about patron reading habits. She argued that when libraries choose ebooks with DRM as the only format for a given title, they are essentially telling

patrons that giving up privacy in exchange for access to a book is ok. Bennett et al., make a similar claim, arguing that “if surveillance is practiced in a context considered fun, it not only renders harmless what might actually be the opposite,” but helps “to domesticate surveillance, to make it more natural and taken for granted” (180). In response to this, we might ask what message the widespread adoption of commercial social media by libraries sends about the library’s role as defender of patron privacy. In what ways can libraries be said to be contesting the growing threats to personal privacy? And in what ways are libraries encouraging patrons to make informed decisions about their online actions? I will end with a quote from Jacob Silverman’s recently published book, *Terms of Service: Social Media and the Price of Constant Connection*. Silverman writes: “If privacy is to survive in the social-media age, in which human relationships and expressions are now being pushed through the data-mining and value-extracting machines of capitalism as never before, then its champions will have to argue forcefully for its importance” (283). Silverman doesn’t mention libraries or librarians here, but as longstanding defenders of patron privacy, I think we can include ourselves among those who have a part to play in conversations about the important role privacy plays in democratic citizenship.

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