

## Imminent Dystopia: Pseudo Identity and Surveillance in Dave Egger's *The Every*

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### Abstract

This study explores the impacts of pervasive digital surveillance, drawing on Foucault's concept of the panopticon to understand how contemporary society is shaped by online monitoring. It delves into the ways tech giants manipulate and control through social media, inspired by Dave Eggers's "The Every". The research questions the acceptance of surveillance under the guise of convenience and safety, leading to the construction of online personas that diverge from true self-identity, potentially causing identity crises. By examining the willingness of individuals to trade freedom for perceived security and services, this study aims to unpack the complexities of modern surveillance and its effects on personal identity. It challenges readers to reconsider their relationship with technology and the real cost of constant observation.

**Keywords:** Surveillance, Foucault, Panopticon, Digital Surveillance, Eggers, The Every.

### INTRODUCTION

Every human on this planet is living under a hierarchical power structure where common masses are always under surveillance. Before the rise of technology, surveillance is under direct supervision of people who works for those in power. In a kingdom setting, common masses are under surveillance of the soldiers or ministers working under the supreme power while in democratic society, people are under the surveillance of the state.

With the advancement in technology and rise of internet, surveillance has taken digitalised form. In this era of internet, majority of people are internet users and have online identities. Though internet has made many things more convenient such as communication, information and many more but it has also put the users under constant surveillance. The users are not physically aware of this type of monitoring, but people in positions of authority may readily access the user's personal information, search history, and other data.

#### 1. What is surveillance?

The English word *surveillance* has its origin from French word *sur* which means "over" and *veiller* meaning "watch". The word also has history with Latin word *vigilare* which

means to care for by watching, be vigilant according to Latdict Latin Dictionary. Through the etymology of the word, we can a surface understanding that surveillance has something to do with watching over or vigil which is “purposeful surveillance to guard or observe or keeping watchful eye over something or someone” (Kaur, on vigil).

### 1.1 Panopticon

When the field of surveillance study is concerned, the primary idea is the concept of ‘Panopticon’ which was originally derived by Foucault from Jeremy Bentham. According to Foucault, panopticon is the constant surveillance of individuals to control their behaviour or in other words to correct their behaviours which is acceptable by the society.

The Panopticon, an idea that was first proposed by Jeremy Bentham. His idea was inspired by his brother Samuel’s factory project designed for the Russian prince, Potemkin. In this instance, Samuel’s impact could be seen in the way the Paris Military School’s dorms were set up. Bentham’s Panopticon design, sometimes referred to as “all-seeing,” features an outside ring structure and a central tower. With its large windows, the tower overlooks the inside of the spherical building. The outside of the building is divided into sections that cover the whole thickness of the construction. These chambers have two windows, one facing the central tower and the other for outside sunlight. Unknown to the inmates, the “inspector,” a tower supervisor, can see into every cell without being detected. Because they know they may be viewed at any time, prisoners behave as though they are under continual observation.

[i]deal perfection, if that were the object, would require that each person should actually be in that predicament, during every instant of time. This being impossible, the next thing to be wished for is, that, at every instant, seeing reason to believe as much, and not being able to satisfy himself to the contrary, he should conceive himself to be so. (Bentham, 10)

Foucault defines panopticon as “a type of power that is applied to individuals in the form of continuous individual supervision, in the form of control, punishment, and compensation, and in the form of correction, that is, the modelling and transforming of individuals in terms of certain norms’ where ‘panoptic’ refers to ‘seeing everything, everyone, all the time” (Foucault).

### 1.2 Digital surveillance

Digital surveillance is another surveillance type which has risen to popularity. In the context of social media, digital surveillance refers to the methodical observation, tracking, and evaluation of online activity on these platforms. People are using social media to interact digitally more and more, which generates a lot of personal data and opens up opportunities for monitoring.

Social media companies collect data on user behaviours, connections, and preferences using complex algorithms and data analytics. This information is frequently gathered for a number of objectives, such as platform improvement, content suggestion, and targeted advertising. On the other hand, privacy, security, and the possibility of misuse are raised by the massive gathering and examination of user data. In the age of digital communication and

social media, finding a balance between the advantages of personalized services and the safeguarding of user privacy is still a difficult and continuous challenge.

With digital surveillance, there is always the concept 'Imagined surveillance' which refers to the perception or awareness that one is being observed, monitored, or scrutinized, even in the absence of concrete evidence or actual surveillance. Duffy and Chan in their article "*You never really know who's looking*": *Imagined surveillance across social media platforms* discussed that the 'Imagined surveillance' includes the sociological and psychological aspects of surveillance, where people may adjust their behaviour if they think that they are being observed. This idea explores how people's behaviours, perceptions, and sense of privacy are all influenced by their perception of being watched, delving into the subjective experience of surveillance.

Modern society is more aware of imagined monitoring because of the pervasiveness of technical innovations and the ubiquitous nature of surveillance tools. The concept that their behaviour is always being watched over, whether by internet tracking, CCTV cameras, or other monitoring methods, can become a part of people's life. This impression may cause someone to self-censor, change their behaviour, or become more conscious of their online and offline activities.

The concepts of agency and resistance are also introduced by imagined surveillance. People's reactions to what they perceive to be surveillance, whether they comply with social norms or aggressively fend off perceived scrutiny elucidate the intricate relationship that exists between privacy, power, and individual liberty.

## **2. Exploration of the themes of digital surveillance in Dave Eggers's novel "The Every"**

### **2.1 About Dave Eggers**

Dave Eggers, born on March 12, 1970, is an American author, editor, and publisher renowned for his 2000 bestselling memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. In addition to his literary achievements, Eggers founded Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern, a notable literary journal. He is also a co-founder of 826 Valencia, a literacy project, and Voice of Witness, a human rights nonprofit. Furthermore, Eggers established ScholarMatch, a program facilitating connections between donors and students seeking financial assistance for college tuition. His writing has been featured in various prestigious magazines, including *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, and *The New York Times Magazine*. (Wikipedia)

One of the hallmarks of Eggers' writing is his commitment to social commentary and activism. In novels like "The Circle", "The Every" and "Zeitoun," he tackles contemporary issues such as the impact of technology on society and the consequences of political and environmental crises. Eggers' writing serves as a powerful tool for raising awareness and provoking thought, making him a literary force that transcends mere entertainment.

In an interview with Carolyn Kellogg on October 4, 2021 for *Los Angeles Times*, Eggers said he kept on noticing new developments in the realm of technology and were both "horrifying" and "comical". This led to his creation of nearly 600-page tech satire "The Every".

## 2.2 About the novel “The Every”

The book is a follow-up to Dave Eggers's dystopian satire "The Circle," published in 2013. In the previous one, the main character Mae Holland rose through the ranks of the named social media corporation, which was created by combining Facebook and Google. The story of the sequel begins when the Circle purchases a massive online retailer and becomes the Every.

Delaney Wells is the main character this time around, and her goal is to end the company's "malignant reign on earth." To do this, Delaney plans to infiltrate the Every and sabotage it from within, proposing concepts so odious that she believes reasonable people would categorically reject the firm. The main goal of her strategy is to spur people to move away from widespread breaches of decency, invasions of privacy, monopolistic behaviours, and the concentration of power and riches. In reaction to these disagreeable features, Delaney imagines a future in which mankind firmly rejects the pervasive influence of the Every.

In order to obtain more information for the analysis of Dave Eggers' 2021 book "The Every," the author employed qualitative research. The study makes use of Michel Foucault's panopticon as a theoretical framework in an effort to comprehend the power relationships and control mechanisms that are present in surveillance. It investigates how the panopticon paradigm relates to digital monitoring and how it influences identity and behaviour.

“The Every” has depicted all the concerns of digital surveillance. In Eggers's nightmarish near-future Orwellian vision, big tech has reduced once-proud and independent humanity to endlessly compliant dots on screens. The Every has taken on a number of situations that, although wildly unrealistic in the actual world, are incredibly familiar. Lycra's widespread use "every curve and bulge articulated" is a running joke representing losing up on individuality.

Large screens with slogans like "Secrets Are Lies," "The World Wants to Be Watched," and "Sharing Is Caring" propagate the "Every" mindset. Workers, who are called "Everyones," are worn out from the continual surveillance that comes in the guise of self-help apps and monitors everything from physical fitness to political correctness. Every's motto of "total transparency" is supported by this type of unrelenting surveillance, which has led to "nineteen suicides" on its campus in just three years. Due to everyone's monopoly on power and the fact that no one seems to know how to stop them, even in such a grave circumstance, no one is talking about it. Customers also forfeit their privacy in favour of an infinite number of apps which are in a sense make their lives easier on the surface but people seem to ignore the reality of the threat to their privacy.

## 3. Literature review

Social media and online platforms have transformed how people connect, communicate, and view their own identities in the digital age. They have become fundamental components of contemporary society. In his book “The Every,” author Dave Eggers explores the dystopian effects of widespread monitoring by means of digital technology and social media platforms. The goal of this literature study is to examine ‘panopticon’ model and how it can be related to the digital surveillance in this technology-driven era. It further looks into Eggers’ portrayal of surveillance in his work while highlighting the lack of privacy and people’s indulgent behaviour regarding the issue.

In Sherry Turkle's book "Life on the Screen: Identity in the age of Internet" explores the impact of internet and digital technology on human identity. She discusses how the internet allows individuals to create and explore multiple identities online. They can present themselves in different personas which lead to the question of authenticity of online personas. She also delves into the blurring boundaries between the physical and digital world stressing on the large amount of time people spent online and how it affects their sense of self.

In the article named "The Panopticon Factor: Privacy and Surveillance in Digital Age" by Jordanco Sekulovski, Panopticon is viewed as a model of surveillance which is still relevant in modern society where there is use of CCTV cameras and web-based social networks to control people. He also argued that this constant surveillance poses threat to citizens' freedom and is strongly against the collection of personal information. He critiqued NDAA (National Defence Authorization Act) in the United States on the basis of this kind of surveillance which threatens right to privacy.

The model for surveillance 'Panopticon' developed by Jeremy Bentham has been taken as reference by other such as Foucault who has elaborated his own theory of surveillance based on the original panopticon model. The Panopticon is described as a circular building with individual cells, each with a glass door facing inward and a small window on the Wall facing outward. The central tower acts as an omnipresent eye, allowing the supervisor to monitor the individuals in the cells. This model represents a form of power that is invisible and anonymous, exerting control over the mind/spirit rather than the body. The Panopticon is seen as a universal model for various institutions and the concept of panopticons is seen as underestimated in modern society. (Jordanco)

Because of such constant surveillance, people especially from younger generations tend to manage their 'online presence' in the face of anticipated surveillance. They use various strategies to remain anonymous creating fake accounts and privacy settings which is related with "imagined surveillance". (Duffy and Chan 1-5)

Duffy and Chan further discuss cases that exemplify the unequal treatment in surveillance, such as a cheerleader being fired for a personal Instagram post. It argues that the function of surveillance goes beyond the control of information and extends to how individual's present themselves for public consumption and self-branding. They also highlight the necessity to question the implications of a society where surveillance is normalized by parents, educators and young people themselves.

There are differences between the Foucault's concept of surveillance 'panopticon' which was developed from Jeremy Bentham and modern digital surveillance. In panopticon, as described by Foucault, the surveillance tool is physically present and visible to the subjects resulting in a conscious awareness of the surveillance tools and people behind it. This leads to a deliberate setting up of personas and acting within the norms accepted but in digital surveillance the users are unaware about monitoring. This allows for a perceived safe space for exploration and anonymity. However, in reality, these digital spaces are under constant surveillance with user's activities and web searches being archived in servers. Panopticon aimed to create docile and obedient individuals through the constant presence of surveillance while digital surveillance is more like entrapment. The digital surveillance with its promise of a safe anonymous space, lures individuals to behave freely and captures their every activity for inspection by others. (Garlen et al.)



Article titled “Surveillance: The Digital Dark Side” by Brittyn R. Davis, examines Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon prison model and how it can be related to the digital surveillance in modern world specifically looks at Dave Eggers’ novel “The Circle”. It explores how the protagonist’s relationship with technology mirrors society’s relationship with digital surveillance. There is always a need in people to seek affirmation and recognition through their online identities which is further explained in detail in a Netflix documentary “The Social Dilemma”. It highlights the manipulative nature of technology and how companies use algorithms to keep surveillance and manipulate the users.

There are only a few researches which are specifically focused on the Egger’s novel ‘The Every’ which was published in 2021. The reason may lie in the limited time since the publication or it may also be because this novel is a follow up of Egger’s 2013 novel ‘The Circle’ which has similar themes.

The study aims to investigate the hypothesis that individuals willingly engage in self-imposed surveillance on online platforms, as portrayed in the novel "The Every," suggesting that despite the growing concerns about privacy invasion, people might be inclined to embrace constant surveillance due to various motivations such as entertainment, professional connections, and societal validation. The study posits that individuals, knowingly or unknowingly, construct specific personas in digital spaces, adapting to the surveillance society and potentially sacrificing their authentic selves in the pursuit of societal approval and conformity. This hypothesis seeks to explore whether the desire for constant connectivity and validation in the digital realm overshadows concerns about privacy and autonomy, leading individuals to willingly participate in a surveillance-driven environment.

#### 4. Discussion

##### 4.1 THE PANOPTICON IN ‘THE EVERY’

In the universe of "Every," ongoing observation reflects the Panopticon's core principles. Users' online interactions, activities, and personal information are always being monitored, putting them under constant observation. The Panopticon's goal of instilling self-discipline via the continual fear of being watched is echoed by this relentless stare, which creates implicit conformity. The characters, much like prisoners in a Panopticon, modify their behaviour to align with perceived societal norms, driven by the awareness of potential surveillance. “On the subway... she’d dropped a wrapper, and before she could pick it up, an older woman with a phone had filmed the crime.” (Eggers 9)

The dilemma at hand revolves around the potential consequences of tagging a video with the perpetrator's identity and widely sharing it. While the intention may be to maintain accountability for one's actions, this approach poses a significant ethical concern. It implies that an individual's lapse in judgment, captured on video, becomes an enduring stain on their record, with far-reaching implications for their entire lifetime. While the notion of enforcing responsibility may seem justifiable, it raises the question of whether minor mistakes, deserving of a second chance, are afforded the opportunity for redemption. This lack of leniency has the potential to unfairly ruin an individual's life, emphasizing the need for a more nuanced and compassionate approach to addressing lapses in behaviour.

The primary idea of panopticon is the reinforcing of power dynamics. As the panoptic authority, "The Every" gains command and sway over the lives of its users. The power

imbalance brought about by the knowledge asymmetry raises concerns about the morality of placing such centralized authority in the hands of a powerful corporation in technology.

Just as the Panopticon envisions the normalization of constant observation, "The Every" portrays a society where pervasive surveillance becomes ingrained in the fabric of everyday life. Characters adapt to the omnipresent surveillance as a routine aspect, challenging traditional notions of privacy and personal boundaries. In the contemporary landscape, the younger generations currently attending schools or colleges have become accustomed to a reality where surveillance is ubiquitous. Unlike previous generations, these individuals have never experienced a world devoid of constant monitoring and observation. For them, the pervasive presence of surveillance has become the norm, shaping their perceptions and behaviours from a young age.

“The vast majority of her fellow college students have been subject to cameras in every classroom since preschool. Their parents had known their whereabouts every moment of their lives, and they had never thought it cumbersome- had never known an unsurveilled life.” (Eggers 146)

Constant surveillance results in an emotional toll where their mental well-being is also affected. This psychological turmoil is portrayed through nineteen suicides in the Every's campus. The novel further underscores the erosion of individual privacy through scenes where characters conform to societal norms, modify behaviour, or self-censor in response to the omnipresent gaze of "The Every."

The novel prompts readers to reflect on the balance between security and privacy, the consequences of unchecked surveillance, and the potential societal implications of living in a world where one is always being watched.

#### 4.2 ETHICAL DILEMMA IN DIGITAL AGE

Dave Eggers thrusts readers into a world where surveillance technologies reign supreme, raising ethical concerns that resonate with contemporary societal challenges. The ubiquitous surveillance raises ethical concerns from the seamless integration of surveillance technologies into everyday life.

“For years Delaney had been cultivating a social media person that would make her candidacy for an Every job seem probable. Even to get the first interview, she knew they'd probed every post she'd made since grade school...” (Eggers 32)

The book questions the idea of accepting things as they are and encourages readers to take an active role in creating the storyline of their digital lives. It also makes readers consider the moral obligations people have when it comes to sharing information, maintaining privacy, and using digital devices. The book makes readers consider the moral agency of people navigating a globalized society. With chapters that show the exploitation of personal information for financial benefit, the novel clearly depicts the role that corporations play in the data-driven dystopia. These scenes highlight ethical concerns about the obligations that businesses have in the digital era. The story challenges readers' moral convictions on profit-driven surveillance and invites them to evaluate corporate tactics that commodify user data critically.

#### 4.3 RESISTANCE AND POWER OF INDIVIDUAL AGENCY

Scenes from "The Every" show characters proactively reclaiming their personal autonomy in the face of ubiquitous observation. Characters that manipulate or disrupt the system are used to highlight how resilient individual autonomy can be. The story questions the idea of total surrender to the watchful eye of technology, encouraging readers to consider how people could use creativity and resourcefulness to survive in the digital dystopia.

"Delaney's purpose in joining the Every was to kill it. She'd waited years for the chance to work at the company, to enter the system with the intent of destroying it"...(Eggers 20). Not everyone perceives "The Every's" approach as fitting for them. There are those who recognize the inherent threat to their privacy, understanding that this could also have psychological implications for them.

The novel emphasizes moments where individuals, confronted with the consequences of pervasive surveillance, take principled stands against compromising their values such as Aggarwal, Delaney's teacher from college. She protested against the giant and believes that if you are being monitored, then "you are not free".

## CONCLUSION

The narrative of "The Every" engrosses readers in a world where surveillance technology is always watching the people. The depiction of unceasing scrutiny forces readers to face the fact that privacy has become a luxury in our culture. Readers may see the tremendous effects of living in a society where monitoring has crept into even the most private aspects of people's life via the prism of the novel.

People traveling through a world where monitoring is pervasive frequently feel as though their independence is gradually eroding. It's not only about being seen; there's also a persistent demand to always appear flawless. Just picture the mental burden of having to maintain a perfect image when every movement is being examined closely. It's like having your own independence slowly eroded, and the mental toll it takes is severe. This study has shown us how, in a society where privacy is considered a luxury, the loss of autonomy and the pressure to project a perfect image may seriously damage a person's mental health. Thus, so came to a conclusion that the desire for constant validation connectivity and validation in digital realm overshadows concerns about privacy and autonomy, leading individuals to willingly participate in a surveillance-driven environment.

The study suggests that there is a pervasive perception of independence in our digitally driven environment. It's possible that many people are unaware of how much monitoring is a part of their daily life. People's digital experiences seem to be characterized by a complex web of continuous observation that is hidden behind a screen of ignorance. This discovery forces a critical analysis of how liberties are seen in a society where widespread surveillance is mostly concealed from view.

This novel shows how technology has permeated every part of peoples' lives and presents a world in which being connected is not only welcomed but also expected. The book challenges readers to consider the implications of the normalization of perpetual connectedness and how much our reliance on technology has eroded the distinction between public and private areas.



Instigating a communal reflection on the moral imperatives that ought to steer our path across the changing terrain of the digital age, Eggers' portrayal forces us to face the awkward intersections between fiction and reality.

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