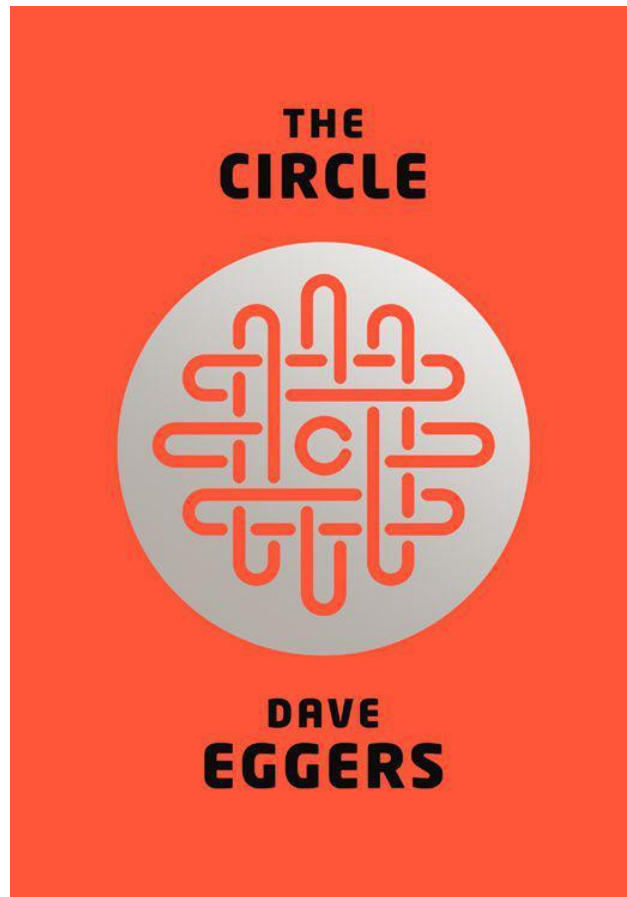


We are going to talk about a best-selling novel which can be a follow up to our lessons about social media. “The Circle” a novel by American writer Dave Eggers and it was published in 2013.

- Look at the title and the image on the front cover: what do they anticipate about the content of the book, in your opinion?



- Read the text that appears in the dust-jacket of the novel and answer the questions below:

“When Mae Holland is hired to work for the Circle, the world’s most powerful internet company, she feels she’s been given the opportunity of a lifetime. The Circle, run out of a sprawling California campus, links users’ personal emails, social media, banking and purchasing with their universal operating system, resulting in one online identity and a new age of civility and transparency”. [...]“What begins as the captivating story of one woman’s ambition and idealism soon becomes a ...”

1. What is the Circle?
2. What does it mean to Mae?
3. What are the Circle’s aims?
4. What are your predictions about the development of the story? (This quotation from Margaret Atwood’s review in the *New York Review of Books* may help you “A novel of

ideas...about the social construction and deconstruction of privacy, about increasing corporate ownership of privacy, and about the effects such ownership may have on the nature of Western democracy”)

- Read the opening of the novel and say what new information you gather about Mae’s being excited and about the Circle’s purposes.

My God, Mae thought. It’s heaven.

The campus was vast and rambling, wild with Pacific color, and yet the smallest detail had been carefully considered, shaped by the most eloquent hands. On land that had once been a shipyard, then a drive-in movie theater, then a flea market, then blight, there were now soft green hills and a Calatrava fountain. And a picnic area, with tables arranged in concentric circles. And tennis courts, clay and grass. And a volleyball court, where tiny children from the company’s daycare center were running, squealing, weaving like water. Amid all this was a workplace, too, four hundred acres of brushed steel and glass on the headquarters of the most influential company in the world. The sky above was spotless and blue.

Mae was making her way through all of this, walking from the parking lot to the main hall, trying to look as if she belonged. The walkway wound around lemon and orange trees and its quiet red cobblestones were replaced, occasionally, by tiles with imploring messages of inspiration. “Dream,” one said, the word laser-cut into the red stone. “Participate,” said another. There were dozens: “Find Community.” “Innovate.” “Imagine.” She just missed stepping on the hand of a young man in a grey jumpsuit; he was installing a new stone that said “Breathe.”

On a sunny Monday in June, Mae stopped in front of the main door, standing below the logo etched into the glass above. Though the company was less than six years old, its name and logo—a circle surrounding a knitted grid, with a small ‘c’ in the center—were already among the best-known in the world. There were over ten thousand employees on this, the main campus, but the Circle had offices all over the globe, and was hiring hundreds of gifted young minds every week. It had been voted the world’s most admired company four years running.

[...]

A million people, a billion, wanted to be where Mae was at this moment, entering this atrium, thirty feet high and shot through with California light, on her first day working for the only company that really mattered at all.

She pushed open the heavy door. The front hall was as long as a parade, as tall as a cathedral. There were offices everywhere above, four floors high on either side, every wall made of glass. Briefly dizzy, she looked downward, and in the immaculate glossy floor, she saw her own face reflected, looking worried. She shaped her mouth into a smile, feeling a presence behind her.

"You must be Mae."

Mae turned to find a beautiful young head floating atop a scarlet scarf and white silk blouse.

"I'm Renata," she said.

"Hi Renata. I'm looking for—"

"Annie. I know. She's on her way." A sound, a digital droplet, came from Renata's ear. "She's actually ..." Renata was looking at Mae but was seeing something else. *Retinal interface, Mae assumed. Another innovation born here.*

"She's in the Old West," Renata said, focusing on Mae again, "but she'll be here soon."

Mae smiled. "I hope she's got some hardtack and a sturdy horse."

Renata smiled politely but did not laugh. Mae knew the company's practice of naming each portion of the campus after an historical era; it was a way to make an enormous place less impersonal, less corporate. It beat Building 3B-East, where Mae had last worked. Her last day at the public utility in her hometown had been only three weeks ago—they'd been stupefied when she gave notice—but already it seemed impossible she'd wasted so much of her life there. Good riddance, Mae thought, to that gulag and all it represented.

Renata was still getting signals from her earpiece. "Oh wait," she said, "now she's saying she's still tied up over there." Renata looked at Mae with a radiant smile. "Why don't I take you to your desk? She says she'll meet you there in an hour or so."

Mae thrilled a bit at those words, your desk, and immediately she thought of her dad. He was proud. So proud, he'd said on her voicemail; he must have left the message at four a.m. She'd gotten it when she'd woken up. So very proud, he'd said, choking up. Mae was two years out of college and here she was, gainfully employed by the Circle, with her own health insurance, her own apartment in the city, being no burden to her parents, who had plenty else to worry about.

Mae followed Renata out of the atrium. On the lawn, under dappled light, a pair of young people were sitting on a manmade hill, holding some kind of clear tablet, talking with great intensity.

"You'll be in the Renaissance, over here," Renata said, pointing across the lawn, to a building of glass and oxidized copper. "This is where all the Customer Experience people are. You've visited before?"

Mae nodded. "I have. A few times, but not this building."

"So you've seen the pool, the sports area." Renata waved her hand off toward a blue parallelogram and an angular building, the gym, rising behind it. "Over there there's the yoga studio, crossfit, Pilates, massages, spinning. I heard you spin? Behind that there's the bocce courts,

and the new tetherball setup. The cafeteria's just across the grass ..." Renata pointed to the lush rolling green, with a handful of young people, dressed professionally and splayed about like sunbathers. "And here we are."

They stood before the Renaissance, another building with a forty-foot atrium, a Calder mobile turning slowly above.

"Oh, I love Calder," Mae said.

Renata smiled. "I know you do." They looked up at it together. "This one used to hang in the French parliament. Something like that."

The wind that had followed them in now turned the mobile such that an arm pointed to Mae, as if welcoming her personally. Renata took her elbow. "Ready? Up this way."

They entered an elevator of glass, tinted faintly orange. Lights flickered on and Mae saw her name appear on the walls, along with her high school yearbook photo. WELCOME MAE HOLLAND. A sound, something like a gasp, left Mae's throat. She hadn't seen that photo in years, and had been happy for its absence. This must have been Annie's doing, assaulting her with it again. The picture was indeed Mae—her wide mouth, her thin lips, her olive skin, her black hair, but in this photo, more so than in life, her high cheekbones gave her a look of severity, her brown eyes not smiling, only small and cold, ready for war.

...

Early in the novel we meet Eamon Bailey, who is one of the three so-called "Wise Men", the founders of the Circle. All newbies, the new recruits, are summoned in the Great Hall to be introduced to the Company's philosophy.

- Read the excerpt and answer the questions below:

The Great Hall was in the Enlightenment, and when they entered the venue, a 3,500-seat cavern appointed in warm woods and brushed steel, it was loud with anticipation. Mae and Annie found one of the last pairs of seats in the second balcony and sat down.

"Just finished this a few months ago," Annie said. "Forty-five million dollars. Bailey modeled the stripes off the Duomo in Siena. Nice, right?"

Mae's attention was pulled to the stage, where a man was walking to a lucite podium, amid a roar of applause. He was a tall man of about forty-five, round in the gut but not unhealthy, wearing jeans and blue V-neck sweater. There was no discernible microphone, but when he began speaking, his voice was amplified and clear.

"Hello everyone. My name is Eamon Bailey," he said, to another round of applause that he quickly discouraged. "Thank you. I'm so glad to see you all here. A bunch of you are new to the company since I last spoke, one whole month ago. Can the newbies stand up?" Annie nudged Mae. Mae stood, and looked around the auditorium to see about sixty other people standing, most of

them her age, all of them seeming shy, all of them quietly stylish, together representing every race and ethnicity and, thanks to the Circle's efforts to ease permits for international staffers, a dizzying range of national origins. The clapping from the rest of the Circlers was loud, a sprinkling of whoops mixed in. She sat down.

"You're so cute when you blush," Annie said.

Mae sunk into her seat.

"Newbies," Bailey said, "you're in for something special. This is called Dream Friday, where we present something we're working on. Often it's one of our engineers or designers or visionaries, and sometimes it's just me. And today, for better or for worse, it's just me. For that I apologize in advance."

"We love you Eamon!" came a voice from the audience. Laughter followed.

"Well thank you," he said, "I love you back. I love you as the grass loves the dew, as the birds love a bough." He paused briefly, allowing Mae to catch her breath. She'd seen these talks online, but being here, in person, seeing Bailey's mind at work, hearing his off-the-cuff eloquence—it was better than she thought possible. What would it be like, she thought, to be someone like that, eloquent and inspirational, so at ease in front of thousands?

"Yes," he continued, "it's been a whole month since I've gotten up on this stage, and I know my replacements have been unsatisfying. I am sorry to deprive you of myself. I realize there is no substitute." The joke brought laughter throughout the hall. "And I know a lot of you have been wondering just where the heck I've been."

A voice from the front of the room yelled "surfing!" and the room laughed.

"Well, that's right. I have been doing some surfing, and that's part of what I'm here to talk about. I love to surf, and when I want to surf, I need to know how the waves are. Now, it used to be that you'd wake up and call the local surf shop and ask them about the breaks. And pretty soon they stopped answering their phones."

Knowing laughter came from the older contingent in the room.

"When cellphones proliferated, you could call your buddies who might have gotten out to the beach before you. They, too, stopped answering their phones."

Another big laugh from the audience.

"Seriously, though. It's not practical to make twelve calls every morning, and can you trust someone else's take on the conditions? The surfers don't want any more bodies on the limited breaks we get up here. So then the internet happened, and here and there some geniuses set up cameras on the beaches. We could log on and get some pretty crude images of the waves at Stinson Beach. It was almost worse than calling the surf shop! The technology was pretty primitive. Streaming technology still is. Or was. Until now."

A screen descended behind him.

“Okay. Here’s how it used to look.”

The screen showed a standard browser display, and an unseen hand typed in the url for a website called SurfSight. A poorly designed site appeared, with a tiny image of a coastline streaming in the middle. It was pixilated and comically slow. The audience tittered.

“Almost useless, right? Now, as we know, streaming video has gotten a lot better in recent years. But it’s still slower than real life, and the screen quality is pretty disappointing. So we’ve solved, I think, the quality issues in the last year. Let’s now refresh that page to show the site with our new video delivery.”

Now the page was refreshed, and the coastline was full-screen, and the resolution was perfect. There were sounds of awe throughout the room.

“Yes, this is live video of Stinson Beach. This is Stinson right at this moment. Looks pretty good, right? Maybe I should be out there, as opposed to standing here with you!”

Annie leaned into Mae. “The next part’s incredible. Just wait.”

“Now, many of you still aren’t so impressed. As we all know, many machines can deliver high-res streaming video, and many of your tablets and phones can already support them. But there are a couple new aspects to all this. The first part is how we’re getting this image. Would it surprise you to know that this isn’t coming from a big camera, but actually just one of these?”

He was holding a small device in his hand, the shape and size of a lollipop.

“This is a video camera, and this is the precise model that’s getting this incredible image quality. Image quality that holds up to this kind of magnification. So that’s the first great thing. We can now get high-def-quality resolution in a camera the size of a thumb. Well, a very big thumb. The second great thing is that, as you can see, this camera needs no wires. It’s transmitting this image via satellite.”

A round of applause shook the room.

“Wait. Did I say it runs on a lithium battery that lasts two years? No? Well it does. And we’re a year away from an entirely solar-powered model, too. And it’s waterproof, sand-proof, windproof, animal-proof, insect-proof, everything-proof.”

More applause overtook the room.

“Okay, so I set up that camera this morning. I taped it to a stake, stuck that stake in the sand, in the dunes, with no permit, nothing. In fact, no one knows it’s there. So this morning I turned it on, then I drove back to the office, accessed Camera One, Stinson Beach, and I got this image. Not bad. But that’s not the half of it. Actually, I was pretty busy this morning. I drove around, and set up one at Rodeo Beach, too.”

And now the original image, of Stinson Beach, shrunk and moved to a corner of the screen. Another box emerged, showing the waves at Rodeo Beach, a few miles down the Pacific coast. "And now Montara. And Ocean Beach. Fort Point." With each beach Bailey mentioned, another live image appeared. There were now six beaches in a grid, each of them live, visible with perfect clarity and brilliant color.

"Now remember: no one sees these cameras. I've hidden them pretty well. To the average person they look like weeds, or some kind of stick. Anything. They're unnoticed. So in a few hours this morning, I set up perfectly clear video access to six locations that help me know how to plan my day. And everything we do here is about knowing the previously unknown, right?"

Heads nodded. A smattering of applause.

"Okay, so, many of you are thinking, Well, this is just like closed-circuit TV crossed with streaming technology, satellites, all that. Fine. But as you know, to do this with extant technology would have been prohibitively expensive for the average person. But what if all this was accessible and affordable to anyone? My friends, we're looking at retailing these—in just a few months, mind you—at fifty-nine dollars each."

Bailey held the lollipop camera out, and threw it to someone in the front row. The woman who caught it held it aloft, turning to the audience and smiling gleefully.

"You can buy ten of them for Christmas and suddenly you have constant access to everywhere you want to be—home, work, traffic conditions. And anyone can install them. It takes five minutes tops. Think of the implications!"

The screen behind him cleared, the beaches disappearing, and a new grid appeared.

"Here's the view from my back yard," he said, revealing a live feed of a tidy and modest back yard. "Here's my front yard. My garage. Here's one on a hill overlooking Highway 101 where it gets bad during rush hour. Here's one near my parking space to make sure no one parks there."

And soon the screen had sixteen discrete images on it, all of them transmitting live feed.

"Now, these are just my cameras. I access them all by simply typing in Camera 1, 2, 3, 12, whatever. Easy. But what about sharing? That is, what if my buddy has some cameras posted, and wants to give me access?"

And now the screen's grid multiplied, from sixteen boxes to thirty-two. "Here's Lionel Fitzpatrick's screens. He's into skiing, so he's got cameras positioned so he can tell the conditions at twelve locations all over Tahoe."

Now there were twelve live images of white-topped mountains, ice-blue valleys, ridges topped with deep green conifers.

"Lionel can give me access to any of the cameras he wants. It's just like friending someone, but now with access to all their live feeds. Forget cable. Forget five hundred channels. If you have

one thousand friends, and they have ten cameras each, you now have ten thousand options for live footage. If you have five thousand friends, you have fifty thousand options. And soon you'll be able to connect to millions of cameras around the world. Again, imagine the implications!"

The screen atomized into a thousand mini-screens. Beaches, mountains, lakes, cities, offices, living rooms. The crowd applauded wildly. Then the screen went blank, and from the black emerged a peace sign, in white.

"Now imagine the human rights implications. Protesters on the streets of Egypt no longer have to hold up a camera, hoping to catch a human rights violation or a murder and then somehow get the footage out of the streets and online. Now it's as easy as gluing a camera to a wall. Actually, we've done just that."

A stunned hush came over the audience.

"Let's have Camera 8 in Cairo."

A live shot of a street scene appeared. There were banners lying on the street, a pair of police in riot gear standing in the distance.

"They don't know we see them, but we do. The world is watching. And listening. Turn up the audio."

Suddenly they could hear a clear conversation, in Arabic, between pedestrians passing near the camera, unawares.

"And of course most of the cameras can be manipulated manually or with voice recognition. Watch this. Camera 8, turn left." On screen, the camera's view of the Cairo street panned left. "Now right." It panned right. He demonstrated it moving up, down, diagonally, all with remarkable fluidity.

The audience applauded again.

"Now, remember that these cameras are cheap, and easy to hide, and they need no wires. So it hasn't been that hard for us to place them all over. Let's show Tahrir."

Gasps from the audience. On screen there was now a live shot of Tahrir Square, the cradle of the Egyptian Revolution.

"We've had our people in Cairo attaching cameras for the last week. They're so small the army can't find them. They don't even know where to look! Let's show the rest of the views. Camera 2. Camera 3. Four. Five. Six."

There were six shots of the square, each so clear that sweat on any face could be seen, the nametags of every soldier easily read.

"Now 7 through 50."

Now there was a grid of fifty images, seeming to cover the entire public space. The audience roared again. Bailey raised his hands, as if to say “Not yet. There’s plenty more.”

“The square is quiet now, but can you imagine if something happened? There would be instant accountability. Any soldier committing an act of violence would instantly be recorded for posterity. He could be tried for war crimes, you name it. And even if they clear the square of journalists, the cameras are still there. And no matter how many times they try to eliminate the cameras, because they’re so small, they’ll never know for sure where they are, who’s placed them where and when. And the not-knowing will prevent abuses of power. You take the average soldier who’s now worried that a dozen cameras will catch him, for all eternity, dragging some woman down the street? Well, he should worry. He should worry about these cameras. He should worry about SeeChange. That’s what we’re calling them.”

There was a quick burst of applause, which grew as the audience came to understand the double-meaning at play.

“Like it?” Bailey said. “Okay, now this doesn’t just apply to areas of upheaval. Imagine any city with this kind of coverage. Who would commit a crime knowing they might be watched any time, anywhere? My friends in the FBI feel this would cut crime rates down by 70, 80 percent in any city where we have real and meaningful saturation.”

The applause grew.

“But for now, let’s go back to the places in the world where we most need transparency and so rarely have it. Here’s a medley of locations around the world where we’ve placed cameras. Now imagine the impact these cameras would have had in the past, and will have in the future, if similar events transpire. Here’s fifty cameras in Tiananmen Square.”

Live shots from all over the square filled the screen, and the crowd erupted again. Bailey went on, revealing their coverage of a dozen authoritarian regimes, from Khartoum to Pyongyang, where the authorities had no idea they were being watched by three thousand Circlers in California—had no notion that they could be watched, that this technology was or would ever be possible.

Now Bailey cleared the screen again, and stepped toward the audience. “You know what I say, right? In situations like this, I agree with the Hague, with human rights activists the world over. There needs to be accountability. Tyrants can no longer hide. There needs to be, and will be, documentation and accountability, and we need to bear witness. And to this end, I insist that all that happens should be known.”

The words dropped onto the screen:

ALL THAT HAPPENS MUST BE KNOWN.

“Folks, we’re at the dawn of the Second Enlightenment. And I’m not talking about a new building on campus. 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. We did that once before. It was called the Middle Ages, the Dark Ages. If not for the monks, everything the world had ever learned would have been lost. Well, we live in a similar time, when we're losing the vast majority of what we do and see and learn. But it doesn't have to be that way. Not with these cameras, and not with the mission of the Circle."

He turned again toward the screen and read it, inviting the audience to commit it to memory.

ALL THAT HAPPENS MUST BE KNOWN.

He turned back to the audience and smiled.

1. What does Eamon Bailey look like? Does he remind you of anybody famous?
2. How does the audience respond to his presence and approach?
3. What are the main points of his speech?
4. What references does he make to recent international events?

...

In the course of the novel Mae gets more and more involved with the mission of the Circle, to the point that she accepts to wear a bracelet which tracks and makes public all her movements over the day. Moreover, this gadget updates her on her followers' responses to her actions and ideas. The following text, which occurs late in the novel, is a letter from Mae's former boyfriend, Mercer, and gives us an outsider's perspective of the Circle.

- Read the letter and answer the questions below:

We are not meant to know everything, Mae. Did you ever think that perhaps our minds are delicately calibrated between the known and the unknown? That our souls need the mysteries of night and the clarity of day? You people are creating a world of ever-present daylight, and I think it will burn us all alive. There will be no time to reflect, to sleep, to cool. Did it occur to you Circle people, ever, that we can only contain so much? Look at us. We're tiny. Our heads are tiny, the size of melons. You want these heads of ours to contain everything the world has ever seen? It will not work.

[...]

Her heart was already thumping, and she knew she shouldn't read the rest. But she couldn't stop.

[...]

I'm moving north, to the densest and most uninteresting forest I can find. I know that your cameras are mapping out these areas as they have mapped the Amazon, Antarctica, the Sahara, etc. But at least I'll have a head start. And when the cameras come, I'll keep going north.

Mae, I have to admit that you and yours have won. It's pretty much over, and now I know that. But before that pitch session, I held out some hope that the madness was limited to your own company, to the brainwashed thousands who work for you or the millions who worship around the golden calf that is the Circle. I held out hope that there were those who would rise up against you people. Or that a new generation would see all this as ludicrous, oppressive, utterly out of control.

[...]

But now I know that even if someone were to strike you down, if the Circle ended tomorrow, something worse would probably take its place. There are a thousand more Wise Men out there, people with ever-more radical ideas about the criminality of privacy. Every time I think it can't get worse, I see some nineteen-year-old whose ideas make the Circle seem like some ACLUtopia. And you people (and I know now that you people are most people) are impossible to scare. No amount of surveillance causes the least concern or provokes any resistance.

It's one thing to want to measure yourself, Mae—you and your bracelets. I can accept you and yours tracking your own movements, recording everything you do, collecting data on yourself in the interest of ... Well, whatever it is you're trying to do. But it's not enough, is it? You don't want just your data, you need mine. You're not complete without it. It's a sickness.

So I'm gone. By the time you read this, I'll be off the grid, and I expect that others will join me. In fact, I know others will join me. We'll be living underground, and in the desert, in the woods. We'll be like refugees, or hermits, some unfortunate but necessary combination of the two. Because this is what we are.

I expect this is some second great schism, where two humanities will live, apart but parallel. There will be those who live under the surveillance dome you're helping to create, and those who live, or try to live, apart from it. I'm scared to death for us all.

Mercer

1. What does Mercer question about the implications underpinning the Circle's mission?
2. In the light of this new perspective, would you rather be Mae or Mercer? Substantiate your choice.
3. Given the information you have acquired so far, which of the following do you expect the novel to be?
 - a. A utopia

- b. A dystopia
 - c. A sociological analysis
 - d. A thriller
 - e. A novel with a moral/philosophical purpose
 - f. A political novel
-
- In the light of the knowledge acquired so far, would you consider reading the whole novel? Why/why not? Substantiate your answer.

Excerpts selected and activities devised by Nella Maccarrone (Liceo Classico "Majorana" Pordenone) and Cristiana Ziraldo (Liceo Linguistico "Grigoletti" Pordenone).

Our mission/mantra is to promote reading in English, but most of all to promote reading!

"To read is to fly: it is to soar to a point of vantage which gives a view over wide terrains of history, human variety, ideas, shared experience and the fruits of many inquiries."

- A C Grayling, Financial Times (in a review of A History of Reading by Alberto Manguel)

"Life-transforming ideas have always come to me through books."

- Bell Hooks

"No matter how busy you may think you are, you must find time for reading, or surrender yourself to self-chosen ignorance."

- Confucius