

Technology sees all: surveillance and control in *1984* and *the Circle*

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Table of contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction | 3 |
| Chapter 1: Historical, social and political context and criticism | 7 |
| 1.1: Context of <i>1984</i> | 7 |
| 1.2: Ideologies in <i>1984</i> | 8 |
| 1.3: Context of <i>the Circle</i> | 9 |
| Chapter 2: The all-seeing eye: Bentham's <i>Panopticon</i> in <i>1984</i> and <i>the Circle</i> | 12 |
| 2.1: The <i>Panopticon</i> | 12 |
| 2.2: Different dystopia's | 17 |
| Chapter 3: Seeing everything: a close reading of <i>1984</i> and <i>the Circle</i> | 18 |
| 3.1: Big brother is watching who? | 18 |
| 3.2: Characters | 19 |
| 3.3: Sharing is caring | 20 |
| 3.4: Knowledge is power | 21 |
| Chapter 4: Discussion and conclusion | 24 |
| Works cited | 26 |
| Appendix | 29 |

Introduction

In 1949, George Orwell published his novel *1984*. Five years earlier, Orwell wrote a letter to Noel Willmet¹, explaining his fears for the future society and subtly foreshadowing the novel he would later write.

Most of them [societies?] [English intelligentsia] are perfectly ready for dictatorial methods, secret police, systematic falsification of history etc. so long as they feel that it is on 'our' side. (Orwell 393)²

In *1984*, Orwell indeed describes a dystopian society where the people are suppressed by their government, where secret police keep tabs on people they suspect are thinking for themselves instead of thinking what the government wants them to think and where history is indeed falsified. The people are watched through so-called Telescreens in every building so that the Thought Police can identify anyone who is opposing the regime. Since this time, many dystopian novels have been written.

In 2013, Dave Eggers wrote the dystopian novel *the Circle*. In this novel, Mae Holland starts a job at a technology company named The Circle. Next to being a workplace, the Circle offers everything a person would need to live: places to sleep, a gym, social activities for employees and parties. It is its own small society. During Mae's time there, the company develops an incredibly small camera which can provide real-time video at a small cost and little effort. This project is called SeeChange. The company encourages their employees to share as much of their lives as possible. The employees don't get punished if they don't share as much, but they will get pressured to do so. SeeChange makes it possible for everyone, everywhere, to see everything.

The reason for comparing these novels is that *1984* and *the Circle* show several similarities. Firstly, in regard to society, they both centre around power and the use of technology to uphold this power. Secondly, both novels have a protagonist that tries to escape this power

¹ Willmet had written Orwell a letter asking "whether totalitarianism, leader-worship etc. are really on the upgrade" given "that they are not apparently growing in [England] and the USA" in the letter that is here used, Orwell is answering his question.

² In this case I'm talking about Orwell as the author of *George Orwell: a life in letters*. For the rest of this thesis, whenever Orwell is referred to it will be about *1984* unless otherwise specified

and in the end fails. Thirdly, both main characters deal with the power they're subjected to in their own way. Fourthly, and most important, both novels, despite the fact that the first is fifty years older, describe similar dystopian futures in which fear and control of the people through using technology plays a significant role. This shows that fear of technology was already in the 1940s and still is an important topic. What's especially interesting is that Orwell's *1984* raced to the top of Amazon's best seller list in January 2017, right after Donald Trump's chief of press called the lies about the turn-out at Trump's inauguration 'alternative facts.' (Van der Velden 2017) This made a lot of people see similarities between Orwell's novel and the current political situation in the US, showing that the novel and its warning are still relevant to this day.

This thesis will be researching how technology is used to retain power and to control the lives of people both in *the Circle* and *1984*. Before discussing the theoretical reflections on power and technology, it is important to define the concepts of power, technology and dystopia. Since there are several different definitions of these concepts it is important to make clear which definitions will be used in this thesis to analyse the novels I have chosen.

In "The technological construction of power", Philip Brey writes about the role of technology in the distribution and exercise of social power. He first discusses the different forms of power in society:

A first point of disagreement in the literature on power concerns the question whether it is a relation between *agents* (individuals or groups) in which one agent exercises power over another, or whether it is a property of *social structures* that work to generate systemic outcomes that affect the behaviours and interests of agents in society. (Brey 3)

In both novels that will be discussed in this thesis, there are agents that are actively exercising power over other agents. In *1984*, this is Big Brother and the Inner Party. In *The Circle*, it's the Three Wise Men, who founded the company.

There is a difference in the way power is structured in both novels. In *1984*, there is an autocratic form of power. The people are subjected to the government. In *the Circle* this repression is lacking because there is no government that is forcing their power over the

people, but still the employees of the Circle are strongly encouraged or even pressed to do as the rest of the Circle does. In this thesis power will be seen as both being intentional between agents, because the government is actively subjecting the people to their power in *1984* and as property of social structures because in *the Circle*, there are certain social structures which are found in every company and aren't intentional. Elements of both forms of power can be found in the novels.

Because technology plays a prominent role in this thesis and in both the novels, it is important to state how the concept is used. In both novels, technology is mainly used to control the behaviour of the people. Technology has an important social function in both novels. Noshir Contractor says in the beginning of *Communication Networks and New Media in Organizations* that:

There is no such thing as pure technology. To understand technology, one must first understand social relationships. Understanding social relationships requires a grasp of communication. Everything about the adoption and uses of media is social.

(Contractor 143)

In this thesis, technology will indeed be seen as a communicative aid, with which those in power are able to control the behaviour of the people. The communication isn't between two agents, but is one-sided in the sense that the government or a company is controlling the people. A concrete example of this are the "Telescreens" in *1984*. In every room in every building there are telescreens through which the government can watch the people. The people are aware that they could be watched every minute so they behave as is expected of them because otherwise there will be repercussions.

Gregory Claeys tries to define dystopia in *News from Somewhere: Enhanced sociability and the Composite Definition of Utopia and Dystopia*. He states that "Dystopia is usually supposed to be an inverted, mirrored or negative version of utopia, the imaginary bad place as opposed to the imaginary good place." (155) He especially takes the component of friendship versus fear as an important contradiction between utopia and dystopia. He argues that "governance or behavioural regulation through fear, mirroring the utopian core theme of friendship" (156) is one of the most important aspects of the dystopian phenomenon.

This thesis will follow the definition of Claeys, in which a dystopia is a society which is based on governance or behavioural regulation through fear. For this thesis specifically, I mean the use of technology to regulate fear. In both novels, there are various dimensions of fear to be found. In *1984*, there is fear for Big Brother and the Thought Police. In *the Circle*, there is fear for not sharing, for privacy and, although less obvious, for not fitting in with the group. To try and find an answer to the question which function technology has in the retaining of power in *1984* and *the Circle*, it is important to know what the historical context was when the books were written. Orwell wrote his novel about fifty years before Eggers did, so the ideas about technology, and the technology available were less advanced than they are now. Combined with the historical context and reception of the novels, in the first chapter I will also be looking at the underlying ideologies in both novels and how the authors used their story and protagonists to criticize these ideologies.

The second chapter of this thesis will study the connection between power, control and technology by using Foucault's *Eye of Power* and specifically his discussion of Bentham's *Panopticon*. The *Panopticon* is a design for a prison where the prisoners are constantly visible to the guards, forcing them to behave well. The *Panopticon* is the main focus of this chapter.

In the third chapter of this thesis, a close reading will be conducted to show how technology and surveillance impacts the characters of the novels and to show in which ways the novels are comparable and in which ways they are different.

Finally, this thesis will be concluded with a short summary of the findings and a discussion.

Chapter 1: Historical context, ideology and literary criticism

There is a 50-year gap between *1984* and *the Circle*. Naturally, this time-difference has to be taken into account when comparing these two novels. There were differences in the social and political context, in current ideologies and of course in the advancement of technology. This chapter will first research the social and political context in which both novels were written and how they were received after they were published. Then we will have a look at the available technology and the ideologies behind it at the time of writing, which is important for the rest of this thesis.

1.1 Context of *1984*

In *Cold War Stories*, Andrew Hammond describes how literature was affected by the Second World War and the Cold War. Hammond states that “the most extensive involvement in the cultural conflict came in the work of George Orwell.” (16) Hammond is referring to *1984*. Even though the novel was interpreted by many readers as an “anti-Soviet polemic” it was in no way Orwell’s intention to specifically criticize the Soviet Union:

A shocked Orwell insisted that his target was any authoritarian regime, not merely Stalinist Russia, and that he still supported democratic socialism: “My recent novel is NOT intended as an attack on Socialism or on the British Labour Party’, Orwell wrote in June 1949, adding that a British setting had been chosen ‘to emphasize that the English-speaking races are not innately better than anyone else’. Few were interested in these ideological distinctions. (Hammond 17)

We can take an important lesson from this quote. First, Orwell states that it was not his intention to attack socialism or other political movements specifically. That was just the way people read it. They assumed that because Orwell wrote a novel in which the protagonist criticizes the society he is living in, that Orwell, being the writer, must feel the same way. In general this is often not true. In the case of *1984*, however, even politicians saw more in the novel than simply a cautionary tale. The US government saw the novel as ideal material to for the propaganda-war against Moscow, so the novel was reprinted in big American magazines and furthermore a series and a movie were created. The result of this was that Orwell’s novel “shaped the dystopian imagination for the next forty-five years.” (Hammond 17)

Even though it is important to distinguish the author from the protagonist of a novel, Orwell was a very politically engaged person who wrote non-fiction essays about politics as well. This makes it difficult to separate him from the protagonists in his fictional novels. There are many scholarly publications that discuss Orwell's political views.

George Kateb wrote *The Road to 1984*, in which he discusses Orwell's political views and his writings. He states that

Orwell is clear in his own mind as to the nature of his idealism. Nothing Orwell thereafter wrote indicated that this idealism had changed in the slightest way. Orwell died professing the only political faith he ever had, namely, faith in equalitarian and democratic socialism. (Kateb 567)

George Enteen wrote *George Orwell and the Theory of Totalitarianism: a 1984 Retrospective* in which he describes his own experiences with reading Orwell and teaching it to his students. What is interesting is that Enteen went to the Soviet Union as an exchange student in 1959. "Arrival in Moscow and then the processing of the student group of which I was a member were Orwellian enough – disorder, rule-guided people all around, dank ill-lit corridors, and all the rest." (Enteen 207)

Enteen's personal Orwellian experiences in Moscow show us that Orwell wrote a novel that was very recognisable? relatable for people at the time of writing. Enteen wonders: "Why was Orwell so penetrating? How could he see so well from afar?" (Enteen 211) These questions are difficult to answer. For this thesis, it is more interesting to notice that Orwell has successfully described a society that was so close to reality a few decades later– I refer to the disorder, rule-guiding and ill-lit corridors that Enteen speaks about.

1.2 Ideologies in the novel? 1984

As stated before, Orwell was very politically engaged. However, his political ideas changed through the years. Lane Crothers gives four explanations for this in *George Orwell and the Failure of Democratic Socialism: The Problem of Political Power*. One of these reasons is that "Orwell's political ideas changed in the light of historical circumstances, and that he

abandoned idealistic socialist politics as he came to understand that socialist states could also be totalitarian.” (Crothers 389)

Totalitarianism is a big theme throughout the entire novel. For this thesis the definition of the online dictionary Merriam-Webster will be used, which defines totalitarianism as “the political concept that the citizen should be totally subject to an absolute state authority.”³

This also comes forth in the novel, as Frodsham states:

As Orwell put it, in words that apply to all totalitarian regimes: “When once you were in the grip of the Party, what you felt or did not feel, what you did or refrained from doing, made literally no difference. Whatever happened you vanished. You were lifted clear out of the stream of history. (Frodsham 145)

Orwell wrote this novel shortly after World War II had ended and the Cold War started to capture world politics. During those times, there was a lot of fear for governmental control, suppression and totalitarian regimes. *1984* was written as a warning for what could possibly happen in the future with regard to governmental control. It wasn't a warning for a specific regime in a specific country, but a warning for all totalitarian regimes.

1.3 Context of the Circle

In *the New York Review of Books*, Margaret Atwood wrote about *the Circle* when it had just come out. She wrote:

Some will call *The Circle* a “dystopia,” but there's no sadistic slave-whipping tyranny on view in this imaginary America: indeed, much energy is expended on world betterment by its earnest denizens. Plagues are not raging, nor is the planet blowing up or even warming noticeably. Instead we are in the green and pleasant land of a satirical utopia for our times, where recycling and organics abound, people keep saying how much they like each another, and the brave new world of virtual sharing and caring breeds monsters.⁴

Eggers has written a different kind of dystopian novel than Orwell has, but it is a dystopia

³ retrieved online at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/totalitarianism> on 5-10-2017

⁴ Margaret Atwood in *the New York Review of Books*, 2013

nonetheless. In an interview with *The Telegraph* in 2013, Eggers was asked about his motivation to write *the Circle*. To the question “What is the greatest threat to our freedom today?”, Eggers answered: “Our feeling that we’re entitled to know anything we want about anyone we want.”⁵

One of the main focusses of the novel is transparency. The slogan “Privacy is theft” (Eggers 303), summarizes what the main goal of *The Circle* is. The goal is to know everything about everyone. No more secrets and no more hidden agendas. In the novel, technology is used to achieve this. With this novel, Eggers is trying to warn people for the danger of knowledge and the desire of people to know everything about everyone, immediately.

When *the Circle* was written, fifty years after 1984, society had completely changed compared to the time Orwell wrote his novel. Technology is much more wide-spread and used in daily life. Technology is omnipresent, almost everything in society is digitalized. People are used to cameras in private and public spaces, and they generally make people feel safe. Newton Lee writes about surveillance societies in *Facebook Nation, total information awareness*:

In the year 2012, from ATMs to parking lots to shopping malls, there are approximately 30 million cameras in the world capturing 250 billion hours of raw footage annually. Since the 1970s, the proliferation of CCTV cameras in public places has led to some unease about the erosion of civil liberties and individual human rights, along with warnings of an Orwellian “Big Brother” culture. (Lee 203)

So even though surveillance has become something that people accept in a way that it makes them feel safe, there is still some concern about whether it’s something the government and corporations should be doing. Lee also writes about total information awareness and big corporations like Facebook and Google. At one point he uses a quote of former Google CEO Eric Schmidt, who said: “If you have something that you don’t want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn’t be doing it in the first place.” (Lee 13)

This is almost exactly what the people in *the Circle* think, that if a person has a problem with being watched, it must mean that they have something to hide. It’s telling that

⁵ Interview with Gaby Wood in *the Telegraph* on October 5th, 2013.

the CEO of a big corporation has said this, because it connects beautifully to the second development Eggers is criticizing in his novel: corporatocracy. This is a fairly new term which means “a society or system that is governed or controlled by corporations.”⁶ It has also been defined as “a political system in which powerful corporate interest groups dominate the policy agenda.” (Muurinen 5)

Hartmann explains corporatocracy in *Screwed: The Undeclared War Against the Middle Class – And What We Can Do About It* as this:

The hallmark of the corporatocracy is monopoly – fewer people holding more wealth, fewer companies owning more of the commons. The very competition that the cons claim to embrace is destroyed by the unrestrained growth of corporate interests. Big fish eat little fish, over and over, until there are no little fish left. Then they eat the middle-sized fish until they’re gone, too. (Hartmann 48)

What we see here is that the term ‘corporatocracy’ is very fitting for *the Circle* because the Circle as a company has a lot of influence on the online market: “The Circle had 90 percent of the search market. Eighty-eight percent of the free-mail market, 92 percent of text servicing.” (Eggers 173) With these percentages, The Circle is dominating the online market. Through using a fictional technology company in his novel, Eggers illustrates the dangers of big technological companies and what might happen if they acquire too much power.

⁶ Definition Oxford dictionary

Chapter 2: The all-seeing eye: Bentham's Panopticon in *1984* and *the Circle*

The goal of this chapter is to focus on the literary motif and historical tradition of technical tools for human surveillance. I will therefore first look at Bentham's eighteenth century *Panopticon*. This will be done by discussing Foucault's *Eye of Power*, in which he elaborately speaks about Bentham's invention.

2.1 *The Panopticon*

In 1791, the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748 – 1832) published a proposal for an innovative model penitentiary. (Strub 40) In a series of letters he wrote in the years before, he already explained the general idea for this model, which would later be named the Panopticon. Literally translated, panopticon means “all-seeing.” Originally, it was Jeremy's brother Samuel who came up with the idea but it was Jeremy who “truly formulated it.” (Foucault 148) Jeremy's brother was an architect who designed this building for the Military. Bentham was very enthusiastic about this idea, as is evident from his letters:

To say all in one word, it will be found applicable, I think, without exception, to all establishments whatsoever, in which, within a space not too large to be covered or commanded by buildings, a number of persons are meant to be kept under inspection. (Bentham I)⁷

In *Power/Knowledge* (1980) Foucault has combined interviews and other writings into a book. In chapter 8, *The Eye of Power* Foucault is having a conversation with Jean-Pierre Barou and Michelle Perrot. They speak of the *Panopticon* in relation to institutions like a hospital or a prison. Foucault explains the *Panopticon* as follows:

The principle was this. A perimeter building in the form of a ring. At the centre of this, a tower, pierced by large windows opening on to the inner face of the ring. The outer building is divided into cells each of which traverses the whole thickness of the building. These cells have two windows, one opening on to the inside, facing the windows of the central tower, the other, outer one allowing daylight to pass through

⁷ The letters Bentham has written are not numbered by page but are numbered per piece. Therefore I will refer to these letters by number instead of pages. [letter corps is te groot]

the whole cell. All that is then needed is to put an overseer in the tower and place in each of the cells a lunatic, a patient, a convict, a worker or a schoolboy. The back lighting enables one to pick out from the central tower the little captive silhouettes in the ring of cells. In short, the principle of the dungeon is reversed; daylight and the overseer's gaze capture the inmate more effectively than darkness, which afforded after all a sort of protection. (Foucault, 147)⁸

There have been a few prisons that were modelled after Bentham's idea, but none of them are true Panopticons like Bentham had envisioned them. An example that is often named is the Pentonville Prison in London, but even though this prison might have had panoptical influences, the guards weren't able to look into the individual cells from their station, thus making it a non-panoptical prison.⁹ This is interesting because it suggests that a true *Panopticon* could only be realized if technology is used.

In *The Electronic Eye: The Rise of Surveillance Society* (1994), David Lyon discusses electronic surveillance. In this, he explains the main goal of the *Panopticon*:

Control was to be maintained by the constant sense that prisoners were watched by unseen eyes. There was nowhere to hide, nowhere to be private. Not knowing whether or not they were watched, but obliged to assume that they were, obedience was the prisoner's only rational option. Hence Bentham's Greek-based neologism; the *Panopticon*, or 'all-seeing place.' (Lyon, 63)

Strub explains how the *Panopticon* would assure that prisoners would behave, even if there were no guards around to keep an eye on them:

It is the pervasiveness of 'uninterrupted exposure to invisible inspection' which permits the *Panopticon* to be characterized as the "perfect secularization of divine omniperception." Bentham assumed that without the unfettered opportunity to

⁸ I am aware that this is quite a long quote. However, I am convinced that it is necessary for this thesis to describe the *Panopticon* this elaborately, because of its significance for the rest of this thesis. For more clarity, a picture of a *Panopticon* is added as an appendix.

⁹ Information about Panoptical prisons found on <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/bentham-project/who/panopticon>

misbehave, the will to do so would weaken while the sense of being observed by an invisible judgemental being would become internalized. (Strub 43)

These two points come back in *1984* and *the Circle*. In *1984*, the prison-element is more present than in *the Circle*. Technology takes over the role of architecture. In Orwell's novel, the main goal is to prevent people from thinking for themselves and to make them behave according to ideological standards that are set by the Party. This is done through fear for so-called Telescreens. Almost every room in every building has a Telescreen, virtually changing rooms into cells.

These screens allow the government to watch into people's homes at any time they desire. The people on the other side, however, don't know whether they are being watched, but are constantly aware that they *might* be watched. In *1984*, the Telescreens take over the role of the all-seeing guard in the tower of the *Panopticon*. Technology is used to keep the people under surveillance and to discipline their behaviour:

The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously. Any sound that Winston made, above the level of a very low whisper, would be picked up by it, moreover, so long as he remained within the field of vision which the metal plaque commanded, he could be seen as well as heard. There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. (Orwell, 5)

In *the Circle*, the Three Wise Men introduce a similar piece of technology. Of course, it is more advanced than what Orwell could think of, but the idea is the same. It is called SeeChange. SeeChange are small cameras, resembling the shape and size of a lollipop. These cameras show live video. They don't need any wires, are small in size and run on a battery that lasts two years, with a solar-powered model in the making. They are water-, sand- and windproof, or 'everything-proof.' (Eggers 62) But the most important thing for this thesis is what the Three Wise Men want to accomplish with this device:

Who would commit a crime knowing they might be watched at any time, anywhere? My friends at the FBI feel this would cut crime rates down by 70, 80 percent in any city where we have real and meaningful saturation. (Eggers 67)

And:

Why shouldn't your curiosity about the world be rewarded? You want to see Fiji but can't get there? SeeChange. You want to check on your kid at school? SeeChange. This is ultimate transparency. No filter. See everything. Always. (Eggers 69)

The difference we see between these citations from both novels is that in *1984*, the people have no choice. The Telescreens have been installed in their homes and there is no option not making themselves visible. They are forced to.

This is a crucial aspect of the *Panopticon*-theory as well. Prisoners couldn't escape the all-seeing eye in the tower, just like the characters of *1984* can't escape the telescreens. They are forced to behave like they are expected to and if they don't, they risk punishment from the Party.

In *the Circle*, in contrast to *1984*, people are *encouraged* to share their lives, not forced to. The Three Wise Men advertise SeeChange as something positive, something which will change the world for the better. Both Winston and Mae feel differently about the respective technology, which in essence has the same function. Winston is wary of the technology, while Mae is enthusiastic. In the following excerpt from *1984*, it is made clear how Winston feels about the possibility that he is being watched:

But at any rate they could plug in your wire whenever they wanted to. You had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized. Winston kept his back turned to the telescreen. It was safer, though, as he well knew, even a back can be revealing. (Orwell 5)

Winston tries to escape the range the Telescreen, because he doesn't want the government to see him. He finds ways to hide from the possibility that they might be watching him.

By sitting in the alcove, and keeping well back, Winston was able to remain outside the range of the telescreen, so far as sight went. He could be heard, of course, but so long as he stayed in his present position he could not be seen. (Orwell 9)

The people in *the Circle*, on the other hand, are enthusiastic about the technology of SeeChange because they can only see the positive things it will bring.

The audience was standing now. The applause thundered through the room. Mae rested her head on Annie's shoulder.

'All that happens will be known,' Annie whispered. (Eggers 70)

In *the Circle*, having all the information about anything that is happening anywhere at any time is seen as a good thing, something humanity has a right to. After a while, Mae even goes so far as 'going transparent.' This means that she will hang a camera around her neck and that everyone in the world can see and follow her every move right as it is happening. Even though she is pressured a little to do this, in the end it is her choice and she enjoys sharing her life with everyone.

Somewhere in the stampeding applause, Bailey managed to announce the capper to it all – that Mae, in the interest of sharing all she saw and could offer the world, would be going transparent immediately. (Eggers 304)

The general idea of the *Panopticon* surfaces in both novels. In both novels, people are expected to think and behave properly, like they are told to do. They risk a reprimand if they don't. However, in *1984*, the Panoptical idea is way more clear than in *the Circle*. The people in Orwell's novel have no choice but to be watched, they fear the Telescreens and they're always aware that they *might* be watched, hence them always being careful in their behaviour.

In *the Circle*, the idea of the *Panopticon* is more subtle, the idea of it is more democratic in the sense that everyone has access to the cameras. The SeeChange cameras are there for everyone, so the people in society can watch each other, but also those in power, like politicians or the founders of their company. It's the people who watch the government to make sure they behave well. They don't only keep tabs on their fellows, but in a way, they control their leaders by watching them as well. The technology with which they do that gives them a form of power which is not present in *1984*. It also perfectly fits the notion that the *Circle* was written in a time where digitalization of society is a big theme. Everyone has access to everything and everyone is watching everything. With the way the SeeChange technology is used in *the Circle*, there is transparency for everyone. This makes that there is a form of democracy present in *the Circle* that is not present in *1984*.

2.2 Different dystopia's

In both novels, the notion of changing and controlling people's behaviour is clear. The biggest difference is that in *1984*, this is done through installing fear for technology in people, forcing them to behave like they're 'supposed' to. In *the Circle*, people are encouraged to change their behaviour so that they will be better people. As stated before, the aspect of fear in *the Circle* is keeping information to yourself, not sharing things that you *could* share.

Peter Paul Verbeek distinguishes two approaches to change people's behaviour in *Technology, Wellbeing, and Freedom: The Legacy of Utopian design*. The first approach comes from Thaler and Sunstein, who wrote the book *Nudge*. They "make a case for designing our material surroundings in such a way that they influence us in a positive sense, without taking control away from us." (Verbeek 3) The main idea of this approach is that the choices people make are influenced by our material environment. We are still in control of our choices, but are steered in certain directions because of our environment.

The example that Verbeek gives for this is that if in a canteen, fried food is easily accessible and healthy food is behind fridge-doors, it's easier to reach for the unhealthy food because there is no barrier. The second approach Verbeek describes is technology that checks our behaviour. Think of calorie-counting apps, in which you fill in what you've eaten and then see how many calories you have 'left' for the rest of the day.

Both of these approaches are heirs of the utopian tradition in the history of design, since both of them embody the desire to realize strong social ideals by shaping our material world in specific ways. And, as we will see, the struggle between steering and freedom is the most central struggle in the legacy of utopian design. (Verbeek 3)

This comes back in *the Circle*. The Three Wise Men use their company to develop technology that will help people, their intention is good. However, the struggle between steering and freedom which Verbeek speaks about is also visible in the novel. This makes that *the Circle* doesn't feel as a dystopian novel like *1984* does.

Chapter 3: Seeing everything: a close reading of *1984* and *the Circle*

In this chapter we are looking at the effect of technology on human thinking and behaviour through a close reading of both novels. For example, we will be looking at how effective the surveillance tools actually are. And who is controlling who? How do the protagonists react to the power they're subjected to? Through this close reading, we will find answers to questions that have risen during the writing of this thesis.

3.1 *Big Brother is watching who?*

We have established that both novels take place in a surveillance society. There is however a small yet significant difference between the novels. In *1984*, it's the people that are being watched without their consent, they have no choice. The government can check up on them anytime.

A Party member lives from birth to death under the eye of the Thought Police. Even when he is alone he can never be sure that he is alone. Wherever he may be, asleep or awake, working or resting, in his bath or in bed, he can be inspected without warning and without knowing that he is being inspected. (Orwell 289)

In *the Circle*, it's the people that can watch those who are in power. Politicians are encouraged to go transparent, so that there are no more secrets that can be kept from the people. In that way, the people are watching each other *and* their government. This gives them a form of power that the people in *1984* don't have.

Within weeks, the non-transparent officeholders were treated like pariahs. The clear ones wouldn't meet with them if they wouldn't go on camera, and thus these leaders were left out. [...] There would never again be a politician without immediate and through accountability, because their words and actions would be known and recorded and beyond debate. There would be no more back rooms, no more murky deal-making. There would be only clarity, only light. (Eggers 240)

3.2 Characters

The main characters in both novels don't have a lot in common. Winston is a 39-year old man with varicose veins and false teeth (Orwell 167) while Mae is a young girl, standing at the beginning of her life. The biggest difference between them, however, is the way they think of their surroundings, the way their society is constructed. Winston is very critical about the way the Party is handling things and shows this by joining 'the Brotherhood', a group of rebels who work against the Party:

We believe that there is some kind of conspiracy, some kind of secret organization working against the Party, and that you are involved in it. We want to join it and work for it. We are enemies of the Party. We disbelieve the principles of Ingsoc. We are thought-criminals. We are also adulterers. I tell you this because we want to put ourselves at your mercy. If you want us to incriminate ourselves in any other way, we are ready. (Orwell 243)

Mae actually goes and does the exact opposite: she helps the Three Wise Men with their goal to eliminate privacy by going transparent, which means that she will voluntarily show everyone who wants to watch, everything she does at any moment.

Every morning Mae put on a necklace, much like Stewarts, but lighter, smaller, and with the lens worn over her heart. There, it presented the steadiest view, and the widest. It saw everything Mae saw, and often more. The quality of the raw video was such that viewers could zoom, pan, freeze and enhance. The audio was carefully engineered to focus on her immediate conversations, to record but make secondary any ambient sound or background voices. In essence, it meant that any room she was in was scannable by anyone watching; they could focus in on any corner, and, with some effort, isolate and listen to any other conversation. (Eggers 307)

Mae actively chooses to help the Three Wise Men by going transparent, it's a way to encourage others to do the same. So where Winston tries to undermine those in power, Mae is helping them further their cause. Even though there is an underground rebellious movement active in *the Circle*, which Mae knows about, this consists only of one person who is also one of the Three Wise Men. Mae doesn't actively participate in this movement which is why I

have chosen to focus on how she's helping the Three Wise Men instead of opposing them.

3.3 Sharing is caring

Sharing information about your life, voluntarily or not, is a big theme in both the novels. As stated before, Mae shares information about her life more willingly than Winston, but before that happens she has had trouble with it as well. In both novels, people are encouraged to spend time with others. In *1984*, this happens at the Community Centre:

This was the second time in three weeks that he had missed an evening at the Community Centre: a rash act, since you could be certain that the number of your attendances at the Centre was carefully checked. In principle a Party member had no spare time, and was never alone except in bed. It was assumed that when he was not working, eating, or sleeping he would be taking part in some kind of communal recreation: to do anything that suggested a taste for solitude, even to go for a walk by yourself, was always slightly dangerous. There was a word for it in Newspeak: ownlife, it was called, meaning individualism and eccentricity. (Orwell 109)

People are expected to spend time at the Community Centre and if they don't do so it's viewed as a crime and people would think of it as something suspicious. At The Circle, there are many activities for employees. In the beginning of the novel, Mae isn't really going to these activities, which gets noticed by her superiors.

Denise's smile was painted. "But as you know, you've had a blip or two when it comes to meshing with the community here." (Eggers 181)

Was there work on the weekend?" Mae searched her memory.

"Did I miss something?"

"No, no, no. There wasn't, you know, mandatory work here on the weekend. That's not to say that there weren't thousands of people here Saturday and Sunday, enjoying the campus, participating in a hundred different activities. (Eggers 181)

"No, do you have a Zing feed about the WNBA?"

Josiah nodded, looking hurt, even bewildered.

Denise stepped in. “Again, it’s just curious that you didn’t choose to share it with anyone. Did you join any of the discussions about the sport? Josiah, how many participants are there in our global WNBA discussion group?”

Joshua, still visibly shaking knowing that Mae hadn’t been reading his WNBA feed, managed to find the number on his tablet and muttered, “143,891.” (Eggers 184)

Josiah leaned forward. “How do you think other Circlers feel, knowing that you’re so close to them physically, that you’re ostensibly part of a community here, but you don’t want them to know your hobbies and interests. How do you think they feel?” (Eggers 188)

We can see here that Josiah and Denise are making Mae feel guilty about not sharing what she did over the weekend with everyone else. They call it ‘curious’ that she chose not to share what she was watching on TV with anyone. In the last sentence, it feels almost threatening; Josiah leaning over her and asking her how she thought *others* would feel. So, even though at the Circle the activities are advertised as being voluntary, in reality it is strange if you don’t go to them or if you choose not to share what you are doing on a lazy weekend-day.

3.4 Knowledge is power

Another big difference in the novels is how those in power handle information. Winston has a job at the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth. (Orwell 13) His job is to “rectify” articles or news items, so that the Party is always right, no matter if they’ve given wrong information:

Today’s issue contained a statement of the actual output, from which it appeared that the forecasts were in every instance grossly wrong. Winston’s job was to rectify the original figures by making them agree with the later ones. (Orwell 53)

Winston changes the information from the past, so that the Party will have always been right, even if at the time they were wrong. Winston is aware that he is manipulating history:

The Party said that Oceania had never been in alliance with Eurasia. He, Winston Smith, knew that Oceania had been in alliance with Eurasia as short a time as four

years ago. But where did that knowledge exist? Only in his own consciousness, which in any case must soon be annihilated (Orwell 47)

One day, Winston receives an assignment to rewrite a news item from a few years back. It turns out to be concrete evidence that the Party is falsifying history and passing it off as the truth:

But this was concrete evidence; it was a fragment of the abolished past, like a fossil bone which turns up in the wrong stratum and destroys a geological theory. It was enough to blow the Party to atoms, if in some way it could have been published to the world and its significance made known. (Orwell 117)

Winston gets scared and throws the piece of evidence into a memory hole, where it would be burned to ashes and no one would know it existed in the first place. He throws the evidence of the manipulation away because he fears what might happen if the Party were to find out what he knows.

In *the Circle*, information is the most important thing to the Three Wise Men. Mae engages in a sexual act with a man named Francis, who films what they are doing without Mae's knowledge or consent:

"Francis. I can't believe this. Delete that. Now."

"Did you say 'delete'?" he said, jokingly, but the meaning was clear: *We don't delete at the Circle*. (Eggers 203)

A while later, Mae is meeting Annie at a seminar and discusses the video with her:

"Don't ask me again to delete it," Annie said, waving to a few senior Circlers in the crowd, members of the Gang of 40.

"Please delete it."

"You know I can't. We don't delete here, Mae. Bailey would freak. He'd weep. It hurts him personally when anyone even considers the deleting of any information. It's like killing babies, he says. You know that." (Eggers 205)

Both Francis and Annie don't take Mae seriously when she says she wants the video deleted. Deleting things is simply not done within the Circle, it's not even a possibility. So the difference between *1984* and *the Circle* is that in *1984*, all information is manipulated in favour of the Party, while in *the Circle*, information is holy and cannot be changed or deleted. This has as effect that in *1984*, the people only know what the Party tells them, even if these are lies, while in the *Circle*, everyone has the possibility to know everything about anyone. The difference between these kinds of information is that in *1984*, the information that is deleted is mainly political, while in *the Circle*, everyone has access to private information about others.

Discussion and conclusion

This thesis tried to answer the question how technology is used to uphold power in *1984* and *the Circle*. The first thing that was researched to come to an answer was the context in which the novels were written and which ideologies came forward in the novels. For *1984*, this was totalitarianism and the message of *1984* was a warning against totalitarian states. In *the Circle*, corporatocracy and digitalization rule society. Eggers tries to warn people for the dangers that could happen if corporatocracy and digitalization go too far.

The way technology is used to enforce power in the books is different for both novels. The answer to this question turns out to be slightly different for each book.

In both novels, the general idea and metaphor of Bentham's *Panopticon* as a tool for surveillance seems to be adopted, more obvious in *1984* than in *the Circle*. There is no concrete evidence that the authors have intentionally used the idea of the *Panopticon*, but we can assume that it is there because of the many articles that support this theory. In the novels, technology takes over the architectural design that's so important for the *Panopticon* to work. In both novels, the characters are under constant surveillance in order to control their behaviour, but there are differences. In *1984*, the government is watching every move of the protagonist through Telescreens. They are actively forcing their power on others and it's not a form of power that originates naturally through social structures. The Party is installing fear in the people because a wrong move might mean that the Thought Police is coming to evaporate you. The Telescreens are thus an effective technological tool to enforce power.

In *the Circle*, the people are also being watched, but they can simultaneously watch others, including their superiors. They do this voluntarily, but they also fear keeping information from others. As stated in the novel: "Privacy is theft." (Eggers 303) This leads to the question whether *the Circle* is a dystopia like *1984* is. Atwood has said that *the Circle* should be viewed more like a satirical utopia, which I think is very fitting. Mainly because Mae doesn't feel like what's happening around her is wrong, on the contrary, she actively participates in it. Next to that, technology that's developed at the Circle is used for positive things, like chips and bracelets that help you track your health (Eggers 152) and chips that can track children, bringing down kidnapping-rates. (Eggers 88)

During the reading of this novel, the question if *the Circle* should be viewed like a dystopia has been on my mind. I haven't been able to answer this for myself because it's a

difficult question. On the one hand, the main character Mae doesn't feel like she's in a dystopia. It's mainly the readers who perceive *the Circle* as a dystopian novel. Mae views the Circle so positive and she's so enthusiastic about everything, while the reader feels more trapped as the novel progresses. So I guess the question is, is *the Circle* really a dystopian novel, or not? For me, I'd say it isn't a classic dystopian novel but it certainly has dystopian elements.

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Appendix



Picture of an abandoned Panopticon-prison in Cuba. Retrieved from <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/panopticon-prison-cuba> on 30-10-2017