Surveillance Capitalism and the Normalization of Digital Surveillance: An Analysis of Dave Eggers's *The Every* (2021)

Carmen Laguarta-Bueno

University of Zaragoza (Spain)

Abstract

Dave Eggers's satirical novel The Every *(2021), a sequel to* The Circle *(2013), expands on some of the earlier novel's main themes while also illustrating and denouncing how surveillance practices are increasingly met with little resistance on the part of the population. Drawing on recent research on surveillance, such as Shoshana Zuboff's theorization of "surveillance capitalism" and Evan Selinger and Judy Rhee's concept of "favorably disposed normalization," this article examines surveillance practices in the society depicted in* The Every *and sheds light on the mechanisms through which Eggers puts forward his message of warning. Some reviewers have criticized the writer's plot and character development skills, as well as his inability to offer any alternatives to this world of mass digital surveillance. Nevertheless, this article argues that Eggers's narrative choices ultimately leave readers with a sense of unease that may at best lead them to take action.*

Keywords: *surveillance capitalism, favorably disposed normalization, fiction, Dave Eggers,* The Every

Dave Eggers's *The Every* (2021) opens with its main character Delaney Wells getting ready for her first job interview at the Every, a tech giant of unprecedented power and influence across the globe. Readers soon learn that Delaney aims to join the company to bring it down from within. Having deliberately written a college thesis on the foolishness of antitrust actions against the corporation, Delaney is confident that she will manage to "enter the system" (Eggers, *The Every* 20), and destroy the company that had "disseminated hate a million times a day" and "facilitated the degradation of democracy worldwide" (12) while establishing an order of widespread digital surveillance. However, later, in a conversation she has with her flat mate Wes Makazian just before her second interview at the Every, Delaney confesses feeling like an impostor and assesses the possibility of bringing the company down from the outside instead. At this point, Wes grins and uses irony to help Delaney realize the impossibility of doing such a thing. "I'll send a strongly worded letter. And you can stand beyond the gates with a picket. Maybe one of us writes a novel," he says (27). Interestingly, Wes's words (and Eggers's novel, more generally) also invite readers to reflect on the extent to which literature can still serve a purpose in a society in which technology companies are increasingly in charge of disseminating the world's ideas "in the form of words and audio and video and memes" (12), and in which technology itself has weakened our ability to "stay still for however long it takes to read a novel" (203).

Expert on surveillance and literature Peter Marks is optimistic in this respect. He believes literature can help us reflect on the possibilities and downsides of contemporary and future surveillance technologies and regimes. Thus, in his book *Imagining Surveillance* (2015), Marks claims that novels provide "vicarious experiences of surveillance" by presenting their readers with characters and plots that allow them to imagine surveillance worlds that are similar or different from their own, as well as by showing how individuals, groups and societies respond to the existence and the development of surveillance technologies, regimes, and protocols (3). This critic then adds that the value of these texts lies precisely in their ability to "supply a critical human dimension" by "dramatizing conflicts about individual and social identity, tackling ethical problems and ideological debates, investigating why people comply with or rebel against monitoring, and supplying creative projections on the shape of surveillance things to come" (4).

In a more recent article, Marks points to Eggers's *The Circle* (2013)—*The Every*'s prequel—as a novel that testifies precisely to "literature's capacity to offer multi-dimensional, humanized and digestible accounts of (in this case) the emerging realm of contemporary surveillance, both in its possible effects and in the prospects it raises" ("Big Other Is Watching You" 10). According to Marks, *The Circle* anticipated ideas that social researchers such as Shoshana Zuboff would only put forward a few years later. Thus, *The Circle* denounced the loss of privacy, autonomy and free will associated with pervasive digital surveillance and, in doing so, "fleshed out certain key elements of surveillance capitalism" (9). Furthermore, by outlining some of the key elements of surveillance capitalism while also displaying their implications for certain individuals and society at large, Eggers managed to engage his readers "in the sort of stimulating thought experiments that mark the best utopian and dystopian works" (10). Marks concludes his article with a brief reference to *The Every*, a novel that resumes both *The Circle*'s storyline and the critique of surveillance capitalism (16).

Indeed, Eggers's post-pandemic novel expands on some of the earlier novel's main concerns, but it also takes things one step further as it takes great efforts at illustrating and denouncing how surveillance practices are becoming gradually accepted and even desired in contemporary society. Drawing on recent research on surveillance, such as Shoshana Zuboff's theorization of "surveillance capitalism" (2019) and Evan Selinger and Judy Rhee's concept of "favorably disposed normalization" (56)—theories which go in line with Eggers's views on surveillance—this article examines surveillance practices in the society depicted in *The Every*, and sheds light on the mechanisms through which Eggers puts forward his message of warning. Some reviewers have criticized the writer's plot and character development skills, as well as his inability to offer any alternatives to this world of mass digital surveillance (Collins; Charles) Nevertheless, this article argues that Eggers's narrative choices—such as the use of irony, the undermining of any kind of reader identification with the novel's characters, or the refusal to offer a way out of this digital totalitarianism—ultimately leave readers with a sense of unease that *may* at best lead them to take action. Overall, this article stresses that literature is a still a necessary and valuable tool that can help us think through the challenges that the technologies of the "fourth industrial revolution" pose for human beings (Schwab).

Surveillance Capitalism, the Normalization of Surveillance, and the Power of Fiction

Published in the context of the COVID-19 breakthrough, Dave Eggers's novel *The Every* stands as a late sequel to his earlier novel *The Circle*, released almost a decade earlier. The Every is the name of the company that gives the novel its title and that results of the merging of the Circle with another all-powerful (ecommerce) technology company—allegedly symbolic representations of Google and Amazon. The company's new name, readers are told toward the beginning of the story, "hints at ubiquity and equality" (Eggers, *The Every* 5). While *The Circle* followed Mae Holland's ascent within the company from new recruit to a greater position of influence, *The Every* follows the life and deeds of Delaney Wells, a young techno-sceptic whose childhood was marked by a phone addiction and who plans to join the company to take it down from within. As befits a novel published right in the middle of a global health crisis, *The Every* portrays a post-pandemic society in which digital technologies are more invasive than ever and in which surveillance practices have become increasingly accepted and even desired by the population. However, as Eggers stated in an interview, he was "deep into draft four" of *The Every* when the COVID-19 pandemic struck (Todd). Therefore, the pandemic motif was just a pertinent and well-timed addition to (rather than the seed of) a novel that aimed to describe phenomena that had started to take shape some time before the advent of the sanitary crisis.

Elaborating on some of the ideas first presented by Eggers in *The Circle, The Every* bears witness to, and denounces, a new economic order that has emerged over the last few decades and that has been best explained by former Harvard Professor of Business Administration Shoshana Zuboff in her work *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019). Eggers's book is not necessarily based on Zuboff's theorization of surveillance capitalism—as explained above, the writer anticipated in *The Circle* ideas that Zuboff would only put together some years later. However, Zuboff's ideas clearly resonate throughout the novel. As Rob Doyle pointed out in a review, Eggers's novel addresses some of the issues Zuboff brings up in her work "from a shared perspective of humanist outrage, in the form of a gulpable fictive entertainment." Only, it does so in the future tense, that is, imagining what society could look like once surveillance capitalism's tentacles have reached into every aspect of contemporary life. Zuboff's ideas are used in this article, together with Evan Selinger and Judy Rhee's, as a theoretical background to analyze, contextualize, and explain Eggers's warnings on the dangers of the normalization of surveillance as conveyed in his novel *The Every*.

Thus, in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Zuboff uses the term "surveillance capitalism" to refer to a "voracious and utterly novel commercial project" (7) based on the massive extraction of personal information in the digital realm and the subsequent use of this information to predict human behavior and generate economic profit. To use Zuboff's words, surveillance capitalism "claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data," which are then "declared as a proprietary *behavioral surplus*, fed into advanced manufacturing processes known as 'machine intelligence,' and fabricated into *prediction products* that anticipate what you will do now, soon and later." Finally, these "prediction products" are sold or exchanged "in a new kind of marketplace for behavioral predictions," the "*behavioral futures markets*" (8; emphasis in original). According to Zuboff, Google was the first company to engage in surveillance capitalist practices but is nowadays not just "the only actor on this path," as other technology companies such as Facebook and Microsoft soon followed its lead (9). For her, what is most worrying about surveillance capitalism is that human behavior is not just being monitored but also shaped by automated machine processes through a process of "behavioral modification" ultimately aimed at increasing profit margins (8). This "instrumentarianism" (8) inherent to surveillance capitalism "works its will through the automated medium of an increasingly ubiquitous computational architecture of 'smart' networked devices, things, and spaces" and makes surveillance capitalism, therefore, "unimaginable outside the digital milieu" (15). As will be explained in more detail in the following sections, Eggers's *The Every* bears witness, precisely, to the wide breadth of spaces and practices through which surveillance is (or may be) carried out in this new socioeconomic regime, as well as to its detrimental effects on the individual—a theme Zuboff also explores in her work.

In her monograph, Zuboff also points to our growing dependency on technology as one of the main reasons why human beings make little effort to resist surveillance capitalism's "bold incursions." According to her, the conflict between the need to withdraw and the recognition of the benefits that these smart devices bring into our lives produces a "psychic numbing" that habituates human beings "to the realities of being tracked, parsed, mined, and modified" (*Age of Surveillance Capitalism* 11). In their article "Normalizing Surveillance" (2021), Evan Selinger and Judy Rhee further elaborate on this issue. According to these critics, the reason why there is not much opposition to ongoing scrutiny is because continued exposure to surveillance makes human beings more prone to rationalize and normalize it. Indeed, an important concern for these critics is what they refer to as "unexceptional habituation" (55) to pervasive surveillance on the part of the population, a phenomenon that has been aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Selinger and Rhee, unexceptional habituation happens when citizens have been repeatedly exposed to surveillance to the point that they are left "cognitively and emotionally unmoved by ongoing monitoring and analysis" (55). However, these critics warn that widespread surveillance can lead people to adopt a yet more dangerous attitude, that of a "favorably disposed normalization" toward surveillance. Hence, widespread surveillance can lead people to regard "being surveilled as [morally] acceptable, and possibly desirable" (Selinger and Rhee 56). As this article sets out to prove, this attitude is also fictionalized and denounced in Eggers's *The Every*, a novel that is greatly concerned about how little resistance there is to surveillance on the part of the population.

Upon its release in 2021, the novel drew the attention of several reviewers, one of them being Evan Selinger, coauthor of the above-mentioned article on the normalization of surveillance. In his review of *The Every*, Selinger claims that there are some features that make Eggers's novel stand out from tech criticism like his own and which, therefore, make it relevant. As opposed to works that explore the normalization of surveillance from a sociological, psychological, and philosophical perspective, *The Every* offers a narrative which is character-driven, and which resonates with the real-life experiences of readers. Furthermore, it shows the process by which "socially destructive" technologies are normalized" (Selinger). In this last respect, Selinger points out that Eggers's novel complements existing academic descriptions of how harmful technologies become normalized by offering "an exquisite portrayal of how this dynamic builds over time." In an interview for Spanish newspaper *El Mundo*, Eggers expressed similar views. When being asked why he chose to write a novel rather than an essay along the lines of Jaron Lanier, Cathy O'Neil, or Shoshana Zuboff's work,[1] he claimed that he personally felt he could develop his ideas further in a work in which readers may not know where the story is taking them and in which they may identify with the characters (Robles). Taking these ideas a step further, the following sections analyze the novel from a narratological point of view and shed light on the specific mechanisms used by Eggers in *The Every* to promote reflection on the threats that the normalization of surveillance poses for human beings. More specifically, the next two sections provide an overview of the narrative strategies used by the writer to represent and denounce, respectively, the many spaces and practices through which surveillance is (or may be) carried out within a surveillance capitalist regime and the increasing human tendency to comply with these practices

Dave Eggers's *The Every* (2021): Exposing the Ubiquity of Contemporary Surveillance Spaces and Practices

There is consensus among critics that the COVID-19 pandemic has, under the pretext of safeguarding the health and safety of the population, given surveillance capitalism a boost. Thus, social work theorist Paul Michael Garret points out that the pandemic has "extraordinarily magnified" (1757) some of the concerns that Zuboff expressed in her work *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism.* According to Garret, it is very likely that the pandemic will result in new forms of surveillance being introduced and becoming embedded in and beyond the sphere of social work (1749). Jeremy Appel has, for his part, claimed that Zuboff's warnings are now more pressing than ever, as the pandemic has clearly accelerated the growth of surveillance capitalist practices on the part of "data-hungry" companies such as Apple, Amazon, and Google. In a similar vein, in a more recent paper in which she talks about surveillance capitalism in relation to COVID-19, Zuboff herself states that the pandemic has produced "exceptional conditions of vulnerability and digital dependency" that certain governments and corporations have used to extract more data and/or consolidate their powers ("Surveillance Capitalism or Democracy?" 45).

In the near-future society depicted in *The Every*, surveillance capitalist practices have proliferated and reached all spheres of life, and digital technologies have become more invasive than ever. Almost accidentally—as explained above, the COVID-19 pandemic struck just when he was finishing draft four of the novel—Eggers sets his story against the background of two viral pandemics. Without it being his main concern in the novel, the pandemic motif does add a timely layer to the description of a phenomenon that has been going on for some time now and which has been magnified by the pandemic. As hinted at above, Eggers takes up the plot of his former novel *The Circle* once its protagonist Mae Holland has become CEO[2] and the company has purchased a giant ecommerce technology company, becoming the "richest company the world had ever known" (4–5). Readers learn that in this interval, Eggers's fictional society has been swept by two pandemics,[3] which have altered different aspects of the characters' everyday lives, killing "half of the stores" (559), eliminating much physical contact and giving human beings "much practice in isolation and fear" (363), and ushering in new surveillance laws, such as the "Right to Know laws" (87), which recognize the right of citizens to know who is infected and where they got the virus from.

In this context, Delaney Wells—a liberal arts degree graduate and former forest ranger who is conscious of the power of technology companies to control the population and diminish human behavior—decides to join the Every to try to take it down from within. After going through several interviews, Delaney is offered a contract and starts rotating through different departments, providing readers with a window into the technologies and policies being developed there. The choice of introducing a main character who rotates inside the company is not without implications. Thanks to Delaney's rotation, readers become witnesses to the pervasiveness of surveillance capitalism's mechanisms to collect personal information and store it for profit—and even modify human behavior to have access to further information.

As happened in *The Circle*, very often it is the techno-utopian characters working at the different departments and sections who present the *benefits* of the Every's technologies and their revolutionary applications to the main character (Delaney, in this case) and, indirectly, to readers. Hence, toward the beginning of the story, readers learn that the health bracelets first introduced in *The Circle*, which were able to track countless health metrics—such as "heart rate, blood pressure, cholesterol, heat flux, caloric intake, [and] sleep duration" (155)—are now, after the pandemics, "required by all insurers and most governments" (7). Readers also learn about "OwnSelf" (70), a phone app (significantly, loved by advertisers) that brings together and tracks your daily appointments and goals and organizes your day so that you can "get done in a given day what you planned to get done" (71). It even tells you how many laughter minutes you should get per day. Or about "TruVoice" (75), another phone app, which records your voice and analyzes the quality of your verbal expression, giving you points when you use "Level-4 words" (77)—that is, more complex and precise words—and penalizing you when you use "offensive, offputting, [or] outrageous" language (75).

However, surveillance in the novel is not just carried out through smartphones and other wearable devices whose owners may decide to switch off at their own risk. Thanks to Delaney's rotation, readers learn about other invasive devices that have reached the home and work spheres, becoming an integral and inescapable part of the characters' everyday lives. Hence, at some point in the story Delaney joins the "Thoughts not Things" department (93), a section of the Every in which deeply cherished personal objects are scanned, uploaded to the cloud, and then burned in a "carbon-neutral incinerator" to avoid the environmental risks associated to the massive storage of goods (100).[4] Delaney soon learns that the company is using artificial intelligence (in particular, some motion sensors) to monitor the pace at which the Thoughts not Things staff are working. Wittily, these characters manage to fool the algorithm by making a pact to work slowly and making sure everybody sticks to this pact, as "[a] fast outlier would set new expectations and throw off the system" (102).

In *The Circle*, one of the ways in which readers were led to share the protagonist's reservations toward the Circle's technologies and policies was by means of the use of focalization and free indirect discourse (Laguarta-Bueno, *Representing* 93–95). *The Every* is similar in this respect, as it features a protagonist who dreams of taking the company down from within and who very often shows reservations about the company's data-harvesting technologies. Delaney's skeptical attitude becomes evident from the very first chapter of the novel, which follows her first job interview at the Every. Just after telling readers how the protagonist deliberately wins her interviewer Dan Faraday over by showing him her health bracelet—which is manufactured and commercialized by the Every and, therefore, "integral to her disguise"—the third-person omniscient narrator gives readers access to Delaney's real thoughts by means of a sentence in italics that reads: "*Forgive me*, Delaney thought. *Everything from here on out is lies*" (7). Here, Eggers creates dramatic irony by making the narrator focalize through the protagonist to let readers know about her real plans and intentions in applying for a job at the Every.

This literary device is in fact repeatedly used by Eggers to invite readers to adopt a critical position toward the Every's technologies and policies. Hence, whenever Delaney is introduced to a new gadget, program, or app developed by the Every, she takes great efforts in making her colleagues think that she recognizes and cherishes its benefits. However, right afterward, the narrator conveys her real thoughts, which often go in the opposite direction, through focalization. This can be observed, for instance, when she learns that one of her colleagues is involved in the development of "Sunlight" (307), a program that aims to set up cameras in national parks and other unwatched "rural and out-of-the-way places where otherwise bad stuff can happen" (308). Remembering her outrage at visiting a national park in the past and finding out that security cameras had been set up all over the place, Delaney internally lays the blame on her colleague for what she considers a disproportionate measure while instead telling him how useful the project may be: "'Wonderful,' Delaney said. *It was you*, she thought" (308; emphasis in original). Here, the contrast between what Delaney says and her real thoughts—which the narrator conveys to readers in the second part of the sentence through focalization—creates dramatic irony, and leads readers to distance themselves from both Delaney's interlocutor and the project in which he is involved.

Overall, thanks to Delaney's rotation through the company's departments, readers progressively become aware of how, in the society depicted in the novel, "surveillance capitalism feeds on every aspect of human experience," more so after the two viral pandemics (Zuboff, "Surveillance Capitalism" 9). Eggers's willingness to offer such a comprehensive picture of the ubiquity of surveillance capitalist spaces and practices may help explain why he has written such a lengthy novel, something which has not been well received by some reviewers (Charles, "You Won't Find"). Being 577 pages long—a book length that the Every's algorithms have metafictionally proved to be "the absolute limit to anyone's tolerance" (207)—*The Every* has amusingly been described by Ron Charles as "a 27-hour TED Talk" (Charles, "You Won't Find"). Additionally, by making use of dramatic irony, Eggers invites readers to mistrust the Every's surveillance technologies, hopefully establishing parallelisms between the apps and gadgets described in the novel and the ones that we already have at our disposal in contemporary society and weighing up the worthiness of their possible future updates.

Denouncing Favorably Disposed Normalization toward Surveillance

In different interviews on his book *The Every*, Eggers has claimed to be amazed and worried about how little resistance there is to surveillance on the part of the population.[5] Certainly, as well as depicting the different spaces and practices through which surveillance is carried out in the society depicted in *The Every*, Eggers takes great efforts to show how surveillance capitalist practices are met with little resistance on the part of its fictional population. Most of the novel's characters are willing to renounce their privacy, autonomy, and individuality in exchange for the safety, the improvement in human behavior, and the certainty that the Every's surveillance technologies apparently offer. These characters illustrate an attitude that is becoming increasingly frequent in contemporary society and which, as explained above, has been described by Selinger and Rhee as a "favorably disposed normalization" toward surveillance (56). Worryingly, as both Zuboff and Selinger and Rhee hint at in their analyses, this attitude is precisely what keeps the surveillance capitalist machinery running. Hence, readers learn that most of the characters of the novel have become so accustomed or, to use Selinger and Rhee's words, so unexceptionally habituated to being watched that they do not mind being surrounded by cameras anymore. On the contrary, they have even come to regard it as acceptable and even desirable. Through a long sentence with no punctuation, which also points at the overwhelming ubiquity of surveillance in the society depicted in the novel, readers learn that digital cameras have been set up:

> in taxis and subways and libraries and stairwells and schools and restaurants and bakeries and offices and government buildings and groceries and corner stores and boutiques and candy shops and movie theaters and the DMNV and art galleries and museums and hospitals and retirement homes and boat-supply retailers and off-track betting centers and chiropractic practices and hotels and motels and vape shops and public bathrooms. (439)

Cameras have even been set up, as explained earlier, in nature, under programs such as "Find Me in the Natural World" (65) or "Sunlight" (397). Being surrounded by cameras gives the characters in the story an increased sense of safety, while places with no cameras are seen as dangerous. Ironically, citizens are warned when they enter a place without cameras, rather than when they enter a place with cameras. Thus, upon entering an unwatched noodle restaurant, Delaney reads a warning sign that says "WE ARE OBLIGATED TO TELL CUSTOMERS THAT THIS ESTABLISHMENT HAS NO CAMERAS. EAT HERE AT YOUR OWN RISK" (32). Later on, the protagonist finds a similar sign on an unwatched walkway, which reads: "*You are entering a path without surveillance cameras. Citizens choosing this path assume associated risks. SFPD*" (35; emphasis in original). Interestingly, the novel proves this "increased safety felt among most of the planet's people" to be nothing but an illusion when, in an ironic plot twist, one of the Circle's chief executives dies on camera while surfing in a beach in Nicaragua, while thousands of online watchers witness his "excruciatingly slow-motion death" without being able to do anything to prevent it (152).

Sometimes, the characters of the novel become the very agents of surveillance, using their smartphones, for instance, to record examples of crimes or uncivil behavior on the part of other citizens to then post them online. "Samaritan" (9), which is the name of the app where all these videos are uploaded, uses artificial intelligence to link each video with the agent's ID. All app users can then share and comment on the video, making the criminal's "Shame Aggregate" tip to "unacceptable levels" (9). In this way, his or her crime can follow them for life. Thus, in the society depicted in Eggers's novel, shame works as a "behavioral modifier" (226), as a way to ensure "the collective enforcement of social norms" (475). In his contribution to the edited volume *The Posthuman Pandemic* (2022), Rick Dolphijn discusses the relationship between justice and the new technologies. Expanding on Gilles Deleuze's ideas on the move away from a disciplinary society to a society of control, Dolphijn claims that current ideas of justice are inextricably linked to digital technologies (including facial recognition cameras, geolocation systems, and social media apps) as people are increasingly "using/misusing their phone apps and geolocation devices, their Facebook and Instagram posts, to install systems of control" (148). According to Dolphijn, "a whole new system of punishment is being realized today," where society becomes an inverted panopticon "in which you find yourself in the centre [sic, BE], and you are surrounded by an infinity of potential eyes" (149). Remarkably, what citizens of the society depicted in Eggers's novel have come to regard as crimes or uncivil behavior may be just minor offenses to the eyes of the readers—to a large extent thanks to the writer's use of irony. Hence, we may question the usefulness and the rationale behind an app that promises to improve human behavior, but which identifies "swervy drivers, loud gym grunters, Louvre line-cutters, single-use-plastic-users, and blithe allowers of infants-crying-in-public" (9) and subjects them to a process of public shaming.

In the novel, the improvement of human behavior through shame is also the underlying principle behind "HereMe, SaveMe" (435), a project with which the Every aims to put an end to domestic violence. The project consists in requiring citizens to have some smart speakers installed in their homes—remarkably, not so different from Amazon and Apple's voice assistants Alexa and Siri—that can then be used to detect early signs of spousal and child abuse, sending the address of the family home to the local police before an incident takes place. To Delaney's surprise, the project proliferates "like a plague" (441). No matter users have no control whatsoever over their HereMe devices or see themselves forced to be "more careful with their words," more "cautious" when laughing, and even "quieter" during sex (439), almost nobody shows opposition. On the contrary, making use of irony, the narrator tells readers that people soon start to see "the wisdom in it, . . . the gains in safety and security" (439) and its main creators Rhea and Karina soon become "apostles of a world message of peace-through-surveillance" (441). In an interview, Eggers has pointed to the difficulty in raising objections to surveillance technologies whose aim is to prevent violence and save lives. According to the writer, human beings tend to adopt anything that provides them with an increased sense of safety. If people believe they can be safer installing video cameras (or smart speakers) in every room of their houses, they probably will (Robles).

Most worryingly, the novel also shows how a large sector of the population has also come to value technology's potential to improve their everyday lives by reducing the uncertainty associated with taking decisions or making personal judgments. The Every offers its customers a whole array of phone apps that function thanks to the massive extraction of personal data in the digital realm,[6] and that guarantee certainty in many different areas of everyday life. As Selinger has pointed out, "the biggest tech company in *The Every* perpetuates 'techno-conformity' by demonizing subjective experience as terrifically unreliable, and by providing an antidote by way of products that counter existential ambivalence with algorithmic conceptions of what's beautiful, good, and fair" ("Tech Critic"). In this respect, Zuboff warns that the resources for an effective or predictable life that human beings seek in the digital realm "now come encumbered with a new breed of menace." In this way, she points out that "the precise moment at which our needs are met is also the precise moment at which our lives are plundered for behavioral data, and all for the sake of others' gain." The result is, according to Zuboff, "a perverse amalgam of empowerment inextricably layered with diminishment" ("Surveillance Capitalism or Democracy?" 53).

One of Eggers's main aims in the novel is, precisely, to uncover the dangers that the Every's surveillance capitalist technologies pose for "personal autonomy and moral judgment, the first-person voice, the will to will, and the sense of an inalienable right to the future tense" (Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism* 444). One of the products which Eggers presents (with critical distance) in the story is "Friendy" (334), an app that eliminates uncertainty in personal relationships by analyzing personal conversations online—taking into account, among other things, facial expression, intonation, sincerity and warmth, as well as the interlocutors' vitals—and giving them "a score and a general assessment of the quality of the interaction" once the conversation is over (52). Interestingly, it is Delaney who invents this app, with the ultimate aim of creating an outburst of rage in the population. Nevertheless, to Delaney's surprise, the app is well-received. It even becomes "the most downloaded app in a decade" in Japan and South Korea (336). Remarkably, readers learn that even if the app creates a "wave of sorrow and suspicion" (336–37) among the population by detecting and uncovering a billion lies in personal conversations, it soon becomes "as acceptable and common a tool of measurement as the thermometer or yardstick." "Because," the narrator ironically concludes, "humanity said in one unified voice, a person has a right to know if they're being lied to, and who in their midst was a true friend" (337).

The above-mentioned app OwnSelf, which helps its users increase their productivity by organizing their daily tasks and helping them achieve their goals, is also a good example of the human search for an effective life in technology. While readers may realize how the app progressively erodes the autonomy of its users by reminding them of birthdays and appointments and telling them when and how to exercise, or for how long to laugh—"[m]inimum is twenty-two minutes a day" (73)—*The Every*'s techno-utopian characters seem to be blind to its more detrimental effects. This becomes evident when Mae's coworker Kiki, who is in charge of showing Delaney around campus and getting her settled, describes OwnSelf as "spectacular" and ironically claims to never have felt "more in control" (73). Close to the ending of the story, OwnSelf evolves into "OwnSelf—Total" (504), an app that tells you how to achieve your goals with "far greater specificity and chronology" (503). In a similar vein, Kiki claims all the stress in her life to have disappeared, as the app now not just reminds her of her daily goals but also decides for her the steps she needs to take to achieve those goals. Interestingly, the fact that Kiki is throughout the novel described by the narrator as restless and that at some point in the story she even considers taking her own life by jumping from the "Aviary" (444), an observatory from which around a dozen Everyones had jumped to their deaths, evidences that she is far from being in control of her own life.

In a more comical note, the novel also shows how, as a side effect of always being told what to do, users of the app ultimately become unable to take the simplest everyday life decisions. Hence, toward the ending of the novel, Delaney starts working at the Every's "Reading Room" (523), an unwatched subterranean room where she finds a box which contains some documents which are "labeled SENSITIVE AND PROPIETARY AND NDA REQ'D" (532). One of these documents is entitled "EFFECTS OF LONG-TERM OWNSELF USAGE AMONG SUBJECTS AGES 34–47" (532). As its title suggests, the document offers an overview of some negative effects of the app OwnSelf among some of its users. Being certain that she is reading something forbidden, but also confident that nobody is watching her, Delaney learns about "[s]ubject 277," who:

> was found today at the bottom of the stairwell, unable to discern how to get to the second floor. Her OwnSelf had not been updated. Subject was conscious of the humor in the situation, but was still unable to conjure a way to get to the second floor, without OwnSelf guidance. . . . When offered the chance to cease the OwnSelf experiment, she could not make that decision, either. (532)

This episode bears witness to the "technological vulnerability" that many human beings now experience as a result of a repeated exposure to (and an utter dependence on) technology (Baelo-Allué, "Technological Vulnerability"). In her contribution to the edited volume *Representing Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Literature* (2022), Sonia Baelo-Allué explores this concept in relation to Don DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020). According to Baelo-Allué, *The Silence* is a novel that shows how technology has become an inescapable part of our everyday lives and made us vulnerable: "we have offloaded to technology part of our skills and human capacities and we have datafied ourselves to be compatible with that technology," losing part of our humanity in the process (146).

Overall, Eggers's novel exposes how the Every, by developing technologies and apps that create a false sensation of (or a fake need for) safety, improvement in human behavior and certainty, modifies human behavior and fuels human addiction to technology in a surveillance capitalist manner. Eggers's warnings in *The Every* go in line with Zuboff's ideas on "the instrumentation and instrumentalization of behavior for the purposes of modification, prediction, monetization, and control" to which human beings are subjected under this new socioeconomic regime (*Age of Surveillance Capitalism* 352). According to Zuboff, surveillance capitalism aims to gradually eliminate "chaos, uncertainty, conflict, abnormality, and discord in favor of predictability, automatic regularity, transparency, confluence, persuasion, and pacification." Human beings are thus expected to "cede our authority, relax our concerns, quiet our voices, go with the flow, and submit to the technological visionaries whose wealth and power stand as assurance of their superior judgment." "It is assumed," she goes on, "that we will accede to a future of less personal control and more powerlessness, where new sources of inequality divide and subdue, where some of us are subjects and many are objects, some are stimulus and many are response" (*Age of Surveillance Capitalism* 515–16). Ultimately, by making use of irony to satirize users' deep faith in the Every's surveillance technologies and apps, as well as by showing how these technologies alter their behavior in negative and even dangerous ways, Eggers leads readers to distance themselves from the novel's techno-utopian characters (and the values they endorse), while proving these characters to be nothing but cogs in the machine. Most importantly, readers may in the process be drawn to identify with some of the characters' behaviors and realize the risks of our increasingly compliant attitude toward digital surveillance.

Is Resistance a Possibility in this New Socioeconomic Regime?

Not all the characters in the novel are oblivious to the mechanisms described above, though. There are some characters who do try to escape the tentacles of surveillance capitalism. This is the clear case of Delaney, the main character in the story, as well as of her techno-luddite flat mate Wes Makazian, and one of her university professors, Meena Agarwal, whose theories greatly shaped Delaney's vision.[7] Wes is described in the novel as a "tech trog,"[8] that is, "a talented coder who lived off the grid" (26). In the "Sea Shed," which is the name of the small backyard unit where he and Delaney live, there are no smart devices and nothing is "permanently (or easily) connected to the internet" (25). Professor Agarwal, for her part, used to teach a course entitled "Free Things > Free Will" (13), which greatly influenced Delaney, leading her to be convinced that the Circle was not just a monopoly but "an existential threat to all that was untamed and interesting about the human species" (13). Throughout the story, and once she learns that Delaney is working for the Every, Professor Agarwal sends letters to Delaney expressing her concern for the direction that things are taking within the company.

Nevertheless, both characters (Wes and Professor Agarwal) end up joining the Every because they believe that it is only possible to make changes from within. To use Professor Agarwal's words, they eventually allow themselves to be "digested by the monster" (546) and start working for the Every with the aim of taking bad ideas and making them better. Even Delaney herself, who is the main character of dissent and had joined the company to take it down from within in the first place, ends up recognizing the positive impact that the technology company can have in the transformation of the world. Thus, toward the ending of the story, she appears to be convinced that stopping global warming lies in the Every controlling all products that are produced and sold. If readers were not able to identify with *The Every*'s techno-utopian characters, this narrative choice prevents us, in turn, from identifying with the dissenters.[9]

If the novel's characters do not offer much resistance, neither does the novel offer a way out of this world of pervasive digital surveillance. The novel has in fact been criticized for this. Sara Collins has pointed out that *The Every* emphasizes the urgent need to save humanity without "evoking the kind of humanity that you'd remember after turning the final page—the kind that may be the only weapon we have in the fight against big-tech totalitarianism." Selinger, for his part, is aware that some readers may be disappointed that Eggers did not use the novel as an opportunity to "explore social resistance strategies through collective action, emancipatory possibilities for data science, and clever routes to breaking up monopolies" (Selinger, "Tech Critic"). And Ron Charles would have appreciated "an approach altogether more radical and unsettling" (Charles, "You Won't Find"). Interestingly, Zuboff's work *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* has also been criticized for this. According to Sam DiBella, while Zuboff skillfully traces the rise of surveillance capitalism, the book "lacks a convincing account of collective action and organization to counter it." Similarly, Ball argues that Zuboff's critique "does not go far enough" and that the book would have required "a much stronger conclusion" (254).

Given that all the characters of dissent in *The Every* are absorbed into the company, and that no clear alternatives to pervasive surveillance are provided, it might indeed be argued that the novel accepts the impossibility of real change. Nevertheless, echoing Zuboff's call in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* to revolt against what is presented to us as inevitable, *The Every* rejects inevitability and stands instead as a call for action. In a more recent interview for the *New York Times*, Zuboff has expressed her belief that ubiquity—meaning the ubiquitous use of data-collecting technology on the part of the population (which became evident during the pandemic)—can be a "vehicle for resistance." To use her own words, "the more we're exposed to it and dependent on it, the more that nexus becomes a vehicle for precipitating resistance, repugnance and revulsion" (Jackson). As this article set out to demonstrate, Eggers uses fiction, precisely, to expose his readers to the ubiquitous character of surveillance capitalist practices as well as the risks that favorably disposed normalization toward surveillance poses for human beings, with the hope that this will lead to action on their part.

As has been explained in the previous sections, by making use of focalization and dramatic irony Eggers leads readers to distance themselves from the Every's revolutionary technologies. Furthermore, he invites us to establish parallelisms with already existing technologies, weighing up the worthiness of some of their possible future applications. Additionally, Eggers uses irony to satirize the characters' search for safety, improvement in human behavior, and certainty in technology, while also helping readers see the risks of overly compliant attitudes toward digital surveillance. These narrative choices, together with the undermining of any kind of reader identification with the characters of dissent—who all end up being absorbed by the technology company—and the refusal to offer alternatives to the surveillance capitalist order imposed by The Every, leave readers with a sense of deep unease about the future. This sense of unease may at best result in an increased awareness of the need to act now if we want to avoid heading toward a future like the one described by Eggers in the novel. In an interview to discuss *The Every*, Eggers has claimed action to be the best antidote against cynicism and deterministic thinking. According to the writer, a single human being cannot bring a monopoly down, but surely there are things that we can do at a smaller or local scale (Matadero Madrid, "Capítulo uno"). Refusing to download certain apps or to install cameras and smart speakers in our homes, and being more careful with the data we are willing to cede, are examples of measures that readers may take after reading *The Every*.

Conclusion

In a cultural moment when "surveillance is becoming exponentially more pervasive and powerful" (Selinger and Rhee 51) and posing unprecedented challenges for human privacy, autonomy, and individuality, human beings are in need of tools that can help them think through all the changes that are taking place. As different critics have argued, and as this article has set out to demonstrate, literary fiction can play a crucial role in helping human beings understand the rapid changes that are taking place as a result of the fourth industrial revolution (Baelo-Allué and Calvo-Pascua 227) and of the introduction of new surveillance technologies and practices, specifically (Marks, "Big Other," 10). This article has analyzed the challenges that the normalization of surveillance poses for human beings as depicted in a recent novel by Dave Eggers, a well-known US writer who has for a long time now shown a concern with issues of privacy, social justice, and freedom. Contrary to what some reviewers have argued, this article has put forward the claim that *The Every* ultimately rejects inevitability and stands instead as a call for action, inviting readers to adopt small-scale measures against surveillance capitalism. Remarkably, Eggers himself has tried to play his part in the fight against big tech corporations by refusing to sell the hardcover edition of his book on Amazon, a gesture that has been both appreciated (Charles, "You Won't Find") and regarded as a futile and "half-hearted boycott" on the part of the writer (Collins, "*The Every*"). Whether such small-scale attempts at revolt will help us avoid a dystopic future like the one described by Eggers remains to be seen. In any case, given the slow pace at which regulations are introduced, they are at least worth a try.

carmen laguarta-bueno is a lecturer at the Department of English and German Studies of the University of Zaragoza (Spain). Her present research focuses on contemporary US fiction and her main research interests range from trauma studies to transhumanism, critical posthumanism, and bioethics. She is the author of *Representing (Post)Human Enhancement Technologies in Twenty-First Century US Fiction* (Routledge, 2022). Her most recent essays include "Richard Powers's Generosity: *An Enhancement* (2009): Transhumanism, Metafiction and the Ethics of Increasing Human Happiness Levels through Biotechnology" (*Atlantis*, 2022), "Trauma and Existentialism in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006)" (*Nordic Journal of English Studies*, 2019), and "Transhumanism in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*: Utopia vs. Dystopia, Dream vs. Nightmare" (*Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos*, 2018).

Notes

Acknowledgment: The writing of this article was supported by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation under grant 2022-137627NB-I00, and the Aragonese Regional Government (DGA) under grant H03_23R.

1. Both Jaron Lanier and Cathy O'Neil have a background in the tech industry and have written nonfiction books in which they explore how algorithms are diminishing us, reinforcing preexisting inequalities, and threatening democracy (see Lanier, *Ten Arguments*; O'Neil, *Weapons*).

2. Although *The Circle*'s techno-utopian protagonist showed doubts and reservations regarding some of the Circle's technologies and policies at some points in the story, toward the ending of the novel she seemed to have dismissed all these doubts as she became determined to carry the company's policies one step further (see Laguarta-Bueno, *Representing*, 78).

3. Eggers does not give much information on the origin of these two pandemics, apart from the fact that they are both caused by a virus.

4. With his decision to include the "Thoughts not Things" department in the plot of the novel Eggers seems to make a critique similar to the one carried out by South-Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han in his work *Non-Things: Upheaval in the Lifeworld* (2022). Han's argument is that human beings have lost touch with the magic of objects and give now more importance to information. According to him, as everything that has traditionally given us certainty and stability has a physical dimension, human beings are now more destabilized than ever.

5. Eggers in Matadero Madrid, "Capítulo uno. Conversación con Dave Eggers y Marta Peirano," *YouTube*, July 30, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFG8kVgvcBk; Robles, "Dave Eggers."

6. In an interview, Eggers has expressed his belief that all the ideas of apps he came up with in *The Every* are likely to become real in a not-so-distant future (Eggers in Robles, "Dave Eggers").

7. Interestingly, according to Doyle, this character seems to be based on Professor Shoshana Zuboff herself (Doyle, "*The Every*").

8. "Trog" is the name that citizens of the society portrayed in the novel use to refer to anything or anyone "resistant to tech takeover" (25).

9. In *The Circle* (2013), by contrast, readers did manage to identify with the characters of dissent, namely, Kalden, Mercer Medeiros, and Mae Holland's parents (see Laguarta-Bueno, *Representing*, 97–103).

Works Cited

Appel, Jeremy. "COVID-19 and the forward March of Surveillance Capitalism." *Canadian Dimension*. June 12, 2020. https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/covid-19-and-the-forward-march-of-surveillance-capitalism.

Baelo-Allué, Sonia. "Technological Vulnerability in the Fourth Industrial Revolution: Don DeLillo's The Silence (2020)." In *Representing Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Literature*, edited by Miriam Fernández-Santiago and Cristina M. Gámez-Fernández. New York and London: Routledge, 2022.

Baelo-Allué, Sonia, and Mónica Calvo-Pascual. "Introduction." In *Transhumanism and Posthumanism in Twenty-First Century Narrative*. New York and London: Routledge, 2021.

Ball, Kirstie. "Review of Zuboff, Shoshana. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: Public Affairs." *Surveillance & Society* 17, nos. 1–2 (2019): 252–56.

Charles, Ron. "You Won't Find Dave Eggers's New Book on Amazon. That's the Most Interesting Thing about it." *The Washington Post*, October 19, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/dave-eggers-every-book/2021/10/18/fc023ba4-300d-11ec-9241-aad8e48f01ff_story.html.

Collins, Sara. "The Every by Dave Eggers Review—Big Tech is Watching You." *The Guardian*. November 19, 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/nov/19/the-every-by-dave-eggers-review-big-tech-is-watching-you.

DiBella, Sam. "Book Review: The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power by Shoshana Zuboff." LSE Review of Books. November 4, 2019. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2019/11/04/book-review-the-age-of-surveillance-capitalism-the-fight-for-the-future-at-the-new-frontier-of-power-by-shoshana-zuboff/

Dolphijn, Rick. "While You Were at Home, Confined: Control and Technology After the City." In *The Posthuman Pandemic*, edited by Saul Newman and Thomir Topuzovski, 141–58. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2022.

Doyle, Rob. "The Every by Dave Eggers Review—Scathing Big-Tech Satire Sequel." *The Guardian*. November 8, 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/nov/08/the-every-by-dave-eggers-review-scathing-big-tech-satire-sequel.

Eggers, Dave. *The Circle*. New York: Vintage, 2013.

———. *The Every*. New York: Vintage, 2021.

Garret, Paul Michael. "'Surveillance Capitalism, COVID-19 and Social Work': A Note on Uncertain Future(s)." *The British Journal of Social Work* 52, no. 1 (2022): 1747–64. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab099.

Han, Byung-Chul. *Non-Things: Upheaval in the Lifeworld*. Cambridge: Polity, 2022.

Jackson, Lauren. "Shoshana Zuboff Explains Why You Should Care About Privacy." *The New York Times.* May 21, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/21/technology/shoshana-zuboff-apple- google-privacy.html.

Lanier, J. *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*. New York: MacMillan, 2018.

Laguarta-Bueno, Carmen. *Representing (Post)Human Enhancement Technologies in Twenty-First Century US Fiction*. New York and London: Routledge, 2023.

Leu, Chelsea. "In Dave Eggers's New Novel, the Problem With Big Tech Is Us." *The New York Times*, October 5, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/05/books/review/dave-eggers-every.html.

Marks, Peter. "Big Other Is Watching You: Shoshana Zuboff's The Age of Surveillance Capitalism and Dave Eggers' The Circle." *Revue D'Études Benthamiennes* 22, no. 1 (2022): 1–19. https://doi.org/10.4000/etudes-benthamiennes.10180.

———. *Imagining Surveillance: Eutopian and Dystopian Literature and Film*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015.

Matadero Madrid. "Capítulo uno. Conversación con Dave Eggers y Marta Peirano." YouTube, July 30, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFG8kVgvcBk.

O'Neil, Cathy. *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality* and *Threatens Democracy*. New York: Crown Books, 2016.

Robles, José María. "Dave Eggers: "Habrá cámaras de vigilancia en cada habitación de casa . . . salvo en el baño." El Mundo, July 8, 2022. https://www.elmundo.es/papel/el-mundo-queviene/2022/07/08/62c19f12fc6c83404e8b45b0.html.

Schwab, Klaus. *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*. Cologny/Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2016.

Selinger, Evan. "A Tech Critic Embraces Dave Eggers's 'The Every.'" *Los Angeles Review of Books*. December 19, 2021. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-tech-critic-embraces-dave-eggerss-the-every/.

Selinger, Evan, and Judy Rhee. "Normalizing Surveillance." SATS. *Northern European Journal of Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (2021): 49–74. https://ssrn.com/abstract=3883551.

Todd, Sarah. "What if Facebook and Amazon Merged? Dave Eggers Imagines Our Dystopian Future." *Quartz*, August 26, 2021. https://qz.com/2051780/dave-eggers-the-every-imagines-a-facebook-amazon-monopoly.

Zuboff, Shoshana. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: Public Affairs, 2019.

———. "Surveillance Capitalism or Democracy? The Death Match of Institutional Orders and the Politics of Knowledge in Our Information Civilization*." Organization Theory* 3, no. 1 (2022): 1–79. https://doi.org/10.1177/26317877221129290.