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ASYMMETRY OF FREEDOM
Dave Eggers' Critique of Neoliberalism's Abuse of the Discourse of Liberty

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This article focuses on the unequal distribution of freedom in the context of neoliberal capitalism in three novels by Dave Eggers: *A Hologram for the King, The Circle*, and *The Every*. Theorists of this economic system closely associated it with ideals of freedom, viewing neoliberalism as an inherent component of a free society. Although never without its critics, this school of economic thought gained prominence in the 1980s, and since the 1990s both Republican and Democratic politicians supported neoliberal reforms in the US. Even though the public support for neoliberal policies has faltered since the Great Recession, it has not led to any significant change in the economic system of the US, with many of its high-profile proponents, particularly in the tech industry, often stressing that their entrepreneurial activities will be liberating for their users.

A Hologram for the King, which scholars associated with the increasing precarity of the middle class in a world governed by the profits-at-any-cost logic of neoliberal capitalism (cf. Besser, Varsava, Miernik), tells the story of Alan Clay, a struggling businessman with a once illustrious career in a last-ditch effort to halt his dramatic economic decline by attempting to finalize the sale of a holographic communications technology to the Saudi government. Eggers uses the story to explore the deteriorating situation of the middle class, highlighting that the freedom promised to the masses by neoliberal theorists fails to arrive, at the same time granting large corporations the right to engage in cost-cutting activities that are detrimental both to Americans and the United States. The second novel is a dystopian story of a social network that uses its popularity to leverage increasingly more economic and political power while implementing mass digital

surveillance on an unprecedented scale that not only destroys any notions of privacy, but upends democracy by turning people into "digital citizens," where "'users' [identify] as subjects of 'Big Tech' corporations and their platforms more than as citizens of governments," leading to a situation in which "individuality itself is reinscribed in digital platforms and the underlying meaning of autonomy becomes subtly manipulated by platform design that conditions behavior" (McKenna 87–88; 96). The final book, a sequel to *The Circle*, sees the company rebranding as the Every after acquiring "an ecommerce behemoth named after a South American jungle" (Eggers, *The Every* 4), that is, Amazon. Despite its unprecedented monopolization of the market, it seeks to further reinforce its position by engaging in social engineering to limit the freedoms of Americans for its own economic needs.

Historically, the notion of freedom was used not only to empower and enfranchise the downtrodden, but also to defend slavery, suppress the rights of ethnic, religious, and racial minorities, as well as maintain systemic injustices. This has led some to consider the idea of liberalism to be a failure. Patrick J. Deneen, his political engagement notwithstanding, has provided criticism that can be encountered among critics of liberalism from both sides of the political spectrum, stating that liberalism, rather than "foster greater equity, defend a pluralist tapestry of different cultures and beliefs, protect human dignity, and, of course, expand liberty in practice generates titanic inequality, enforces uniformity and homogeneity, fosters material and spiritual degradation, and undermines freedom" (3).[1] Setting aside questions of whether the problem is inherent to liberalism as Deneen claims or whether the issue lies in its implementation and a vague understanding of what freedom should be, it cannot be denied that contemporary neoliberal capitalism draws heavily on the discourse associated with the term. However, it only does so in limited scope; as Rachel Greenwald Smith notes, neoliberalism only embraces liberalism's economic aspect, ignoring the political one (5). Furthermore, it diverges from the ideas of liberal philosophers. Adam Smith, for example, noted that "defence […] is of much more importance than opulence," stressing the need for protective regulation, along with publicly funded public works. Similarly, John Stuart Mill clearly placed more emphasis on personal liberty, which in his view could

1 Deneen has been associated with J.D. Vance, Donald Trump's vice-presidential candidate in the 2024 elections. For more information about Deneen, as well as criticisms of liberalism from both sides of the spectrum, see Beauchamp.

Mirosław Aleksander Miernik
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only be limited by the freedom of another person, than on economic liberty, allowing for market regulation where and when it is needed.

Although such thinkers were more concerned with individual freedoms, including those associated with the market, they did not argue that capitalism or freedom of the market is the basis of such freedoms. Nonetheless, in the 20th century economists who argued that capitalism is essentially associated with freedom, most significantly Friedrich Hayek in his *Road to Serfdom* and Milton Friedman in his *Capitalism and Freedom*, gained prominence. The second book is particularly significant. Written against the backdrop of the Keynesian approach that was adopted on a wide scale during the Great Depression, Friedman famously claimed that capitalism was a tool of introducing new liberties, at the same time arguing for an extremely limited view of the social responsibility of business entities, which was to be constricted to providing profits to its shareholders (133). Simultaneously, ignoring the more nuanced aspects of Hayek's thought related to the role of government, neoliberal economists pushed for deregulation, claiming that such an implementation of a free market will benefit everyone, as companies striving for profits will provide goods of superior quality at competitive prices. Libertarian authors such as Murray Rothbard, Charles Murray, and David Friedman took this to its extreme in, respectively, *For a New Liberty*, *What it Means to Be a Libertarian*, and *Machinery of Freedom*, postulating an anarcho-capitalist stateless world, where laws would be enforced by private enterprises, which they claim will have a positive impact on society and allow for unprecedented personal freedom. There were multiple criticisms of this approach, which Tyler Cowen, himself a libertarian, succinctly summarized in his statement that "anarcho-capitalism would collapse into Thomas Hobbes's state of nature, with life nasty, short, and brutish" (292).

Ideals of an almost unrestricted freedom were seen as posing a threat to the social sphere, an issue that Alexis de Tocqueville already noted in his *Democracy in America*, emphasizing that such an understanding of freedom may lead to social atomization that entails a weak social structure. De Tocqueville's statements pertained, inter alia, to the lack of a social elite that would enforce social awareness, an issue echoed by later writers on the left, such as Zygmunt Bauman (64), who have raised similar concerns in terms of a lack of authorities. Even more importantly in the context of this essay, de Tocqueville warned that the discourse of freedom may lead to such problems as a tyranny of the majority or to the rise of industrialists and business owners to the position of a new aristocracy, a group that would be above

the law, which it could influence. This brings to mind not only Gilded Age monopolies, but also the heads of large technological companies such as Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, Bill Gates, and Jeff Bezos, all of whom arguably have undue sway over American politics and even public opinion.

Owing to the role the tech industry plays in *The Circle* and *The Every*, it is crucial to note James Arnt Aune's observation that radical libertarian discourse has been particularly appealing to entrepreneurs associated with this field (115, 170). Further stressing this association is the fact that technological entrepreneurs have often attempted to portray themselves as champions of free speech, for example Elon Musk, who even refers to himself as a "free speech absolutist." However, the actions of such people put such statements in serious doubt, as illustrated by Musk's retaliation against former employees or his critics (Tangalakis-Lippert). Additionally, the ostensible care of such wealthy tech entrepreneurs for the good of society rings hollow in the context of the social media platforms they own knowingly engaging in dangerous and dishonest conduct (Ortutay and Klepper; Tangalakis-Lippert). It also has been noted that the absolute, unrestricted freedom of speech that such entrepreneurs support poses a threat to democracy (Thornhill). Finally, it is noteworthy that legislation granting privileges to large companies is often supported by argumentation that it is an extension of the constitutional freedoms of all Americans, suggesting that a different course of action would impede on their liberties. This is best illustrated by the 2010 Citizens United v. FEC Supreme Court decision that stated that the federal government cannot restrict independent expenditures on political campaigns, as they are protected by the first amendment to the US constitution, despite financial resources arguably being of a different nature than speech.

A Hologram for the King tackles this subject in the broader scope of the globalized economy after the 2007/2008 financial crisis and subsequent Great Recession, specifically focusing on the promises of neoliberalism that failed to arrive. The first issue is financial prosperity. The protagonist, Alan Clay, once a successful executive at Schwinn, a bicycle manufacturing company, followed the gospel of neoliberal deregulation. Using parallels with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Eggers highlights that the promised wealth that was to trickle down to Americans as the rich got richer never arrives. The second issue pertains to freedom. As mentioned earlier, Milton Friedman claimed that deregulated, free-market capitalism would usher in more political and individual liberties (*Capitalism and Freedom* 7–21). Friedman even illustrated this with what has been dubbed the "Miracle

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of Chile," arguing that free-market policies were key in the change in that country's rule from a military junta to a liberal democracy ("Commanding Hights"; "Up for Debate"), but Eggers counters this by showcasing how Saudi Arabia and China, both countries with poor human rights records, thrive on unethical and exploitative tactics, which are illustrated by the treatment of Filipinos in the novel, as well as the cut-throat and arguably unethical competitive practices that account for Alan's failure to secure the sale of the holographic communications technology to the Saudi government. Yet neoliberal capitalism even fails on a smaller scale, such as in the claims that it will offer a wider array of consumer choice (Friedman 168, 186): as Alan notes, bicycles have become homogenized, and "it's a matter of putting different stickers on the same bikes" as "[t]hey're all built in the same handful of factories" (*A Hologram* 50).

Alan plays the role of an unwitting tool in the deterioration of the economic position of the US and the erosion of freedoms which it entails. His actions have contributed to what Besser and Dijk argue is the deterritorialization of labor (115), the removal of manufacturing abroad to cut costs. Engaging in such activity, Alan eventually rendered himself redundant, becoming an allegory for the disappearance of the American dream for the middle class as a result of neoliberal policies. Clay, like a majority of Americans, fell for the promise of a robust, highly competitive economy, which follows the logic of Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric, whose belief that "manufacturing should be on a perpetual barge, circling the globe for the cheapest conditions possible" is reiterated by in the novel (*A Hologram* 13). Alan's actions were also detrimental to his company, as he, along with his superiors, failed to take into account that well-paid, experienced workers will be better employees than cheap, inexperienced labor. He sees this brought to the next level in Saudi Arabia, where dangerous and repetitive tasks are handled by Filipinos trying to escape the extreme poverty of their own country only to get trapped in modern-day wage slavery, separated both from the Saudi elites as well as the westerners working there (Besser and Dijk 123; Miernik 125). The novel further highlights the abuses of deregulation and the use of predatory tactics that affect the situation of the hitherto prosperous middle class with such examples as the Banana Republic store card debacle destroys Alan's credit rating making it impossible for him to obtain funding for any entrepreneurial initiatives he has (*A Hologram* 137–138), the rising price of a higher education to a prohibitive degree (4), and the relocation removal of manufacturing that has led to a loss of national

pride and doubts as to the country's future, particularly in economic terms (13, 84, 129–131).

Words warning of the potential negative impact of neoliberalism, particularly in terms of consumers, workers, and welfare programs were already raised in the early 1980s (Isaacson; "From the Schools to the Sewers"; Alexander). In this context it would be easy to dismiss Alan as naïve. But Eggers' treatment of his protagonist, along with his flaws, can be read as a sincere comment on the significance of such values for Americans. Varsava argues he also can be seen as a Hemingwayesque character who "tries to live up to a largely masculinist personal code—courage, self-reliance, accountability, physical prowess" (779–780), stressing the association of these values with ideals of American exceptionalism (787–788), and associating it with the American understanding of freedom. This has primed Clay—and, by extension, the US public invested in such ideals—as easy pickings for the rich looking to increase their wealth who promote their position with references to ideals of liberty. However, in such discourse "freedom" becomes a hollow word meant to ramp up support for a narrow and already privileged group, disregarding the effects of precarization on the liberties of others.

The references to self-reliance, freedom, and prosperity, owing to their association with American national ideals, is an insidious tactic. Such rhetoric, which James Arnt Aune dubs "economic correctness" (4, 10), suggests that non-compliance with the principles of neoliberalism essentially is un-American, accounting for the widespread acceptance of neoliberal policies between the Reagan period and the Great Recession.[2] Ironically, it is the uncritical acceptance of this economic paradigm that erodes the values, and, as Varsava argues, leads the US to lose its exceptional status and lead to a "precarity of ambition" (785–789), the former of which is illustrated by the dismissive treatment Alan and his team receive in Saudi Arabia (*A Hologram* 55–57, 69–70, 77–79, 87–90, 191–195, 309–312). Still, although Alan attempts to remain optimistic (*Hologram* 14, 312), reminders of the state of the American economy anger him, as visible during several interactions (10–14, 48–51, 84–86, 136–137). His optimism transpires to be a flimsy pose with which he attempts

2 It is characteristic that such rhetoric has not disappeared after the recession, but its economic aspect has become downplayed and replaced by general platitudes pertaining to freedom, prosperity, and American exceptionalism, which was particularly often employed by populist politicians such as Donald Trump.

Mirosław Aleksander Miernik
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to conceal the fact that he is a man defeated (177), aware that his situation is the result of the shortsightedness of such people as himself (50).

A Hologram for the King offers a look at the dissonance between the promise of the free market that was to extend more liberties throughout society and the reality of this economic paradigm. These promises transpire to be hollow, akin to the cheap marketing tactics Alan was taught as a salesman at the start of his career (*A Hologram* 79–80). Yet neither wealth nor freedom trickle down. However, with less resources, rising prices, and an increasingly unstable and unsustainable economy that is the result of neoliberalism's prioritization of profits, Eggers' characters are exhausted and lack both the energy and the financial resources to use their freedoms and pursue their goals.

The Circle and its sequel, *The Every*, take on a more specific perspective, focusing on how the titular company of the novels, similarly to real-life tech giants such as Facebook or Google, adopts the rhetoric of freedom, claiming that the technology it offers has liberating potential and guarantees the improvement of humankind. However, in reality it uses such discourse to engage in social engineering and digital surveillance that benefits it financially, while impeding the personal freedoms of its users. Eggers' primary concern in these novels is the right to privacy, freedom of choice, and free will. The books can be seen as a continuation of an idea he initially explored in *A Hologram for the King*: once the US economy no longer relies on manufacturing, it has to rely on virtual goods, predominantly information, communication, and convenience, as its chief products. In this context personal information becomes, as Roy Sommer puts it, "the gold and oil of the digital age" (53). Accordingly, *The Circle* has been widely discussed primarily in terms of surveillance and privacy (Bugno-Narecka; Gouck; Pignagnoli; McKenna; Selisker; Sommer; Wasihun). But the securing of its monopolistic position also entails the limiting of entrepreneurial and individual freedom. The company has such sway over the market that other tech companies often exist with the goal of being purchased by it (*The Every* 10, 16); in other words, not being part of the Every conglomerate has ceased being a viable economic option in the novel's reality. This surrendering of entrepreneurial independence runs parallel to the company's infringement on the freedoms of its users. On the most basic level, this refers to an often neglected transaction characteristic in the use of social media: giving up personal information for, as Randolph Lewis writes, "community, connection, and convenience," a phenomenon he calls the "funopticon" (5, 54–56, 81). This aspect has been normalized to such a degree that many users are unaware that such

a transaction takes place, and frequently view on-line social networks and similar websites as free, although the personal data that people surrender entails greater profits for such companies than they would make by introducing fees (van Dijck 170). Users also lack knowledge about the manner in which their data will be monetized, rarely reading license agreements that are long and often purposefully written in an obscure manner.

Regardless, the Circle promotes the surrendering of privacy as a means of improving society. Mae, the novel's protagonist, becomes the figurehead of this initiative, following a set of slogans that brings to mind Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

SECRETS ARE LIES
SHARING IS CARING
PRIVACY IS THEFT. (303)

The company rhetorically frames privacy as a violation of the freedom of others to access knowledge. However, this is one-sided and "promote[s] […] the company's right to collect data, which in turn benefits the company while exploiting the individual citizen the rhetoric claims to serve" (McKenna 87). Such acts echo real-life arguments made by executives of Facebook, including Mark Zuckerberg, who has stressed his "desire to 'make the world more transparent'" (van Dijck 14). As van Dijck notes, tech companies employ the ideal of transparency in a one-sided manner and are notoriously secretive about their use of such data (van Dijck 12, 17, 61).

Although it has been argued that *The Circle* creates "a system ruled by sousveillance" (Pignagnoli155), the information the company obtains is used solely for its own benefit rather than the public (Wasihun), which is manipulated by the corporation. This is the same reason for which the corporate regime in the novels is a rather unorthodox example of Deleuze's society of control, as the Three Wise Men—the heads of the company—continue to exercise disciplinary power, a practice the French philosopher postulated would be absent from such a society (Wasihun; Gouck; cf. Selisker 761–763, 770–772). Accordingly, the company's tactics represent a two-pronged strategy that is "driven by a mixture of benign utopianism and pseudofascist behavioral compliance" (*The Every* 9). This accounts for the Every's attempts to ensure support for its policies by rhetorically equating the non-endorsement of its products and strategies as opposition to social improvement.

Mirosław Aleksander Miernik
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Employees of the company have fallen for such rhetoric of freedom and social improvement, blind to its flaws, resulting in an almost fanatical devotion to the Every. Simultaneously, they ignore how it encroaches on the freedom of others, an issue visible when they defend the Circle against accusations of breaking anti-trust laws by citing its efficiency as justification for its position (*The Circle* 173–174), neglecting the impact this has on the market, including freedom of competition and the freedom of consumer choice; they also use red herring tactics to deflect accusations of the Every being a monopoly, as illustrated by one employee's defense of the company: "who cares about monopolies when we're facing the death of the planet?" At the same time, she blames "untethered capitalism" for the ecological crisis (*The Every* 354–355), showcasing her uncritical approach to her employer: the very anti-trust legislation that she attacks is intended to tether capitalism and protect the public.

More importantly, the argumentation employees use in terms of the company support the view that the company should be above the law. Not only do they reject government oversight but demand the power to surveil the government, ostensibly in the name of democracy (*The Circle* 206–210, 383–386). Unsurprisingly, the company weaponizes the data it collects against the politicians who have attempted to regulate it producing "mountains of evidence made conveniently available to social media and attorneys general" which include "messages […] containing unpardonable beliefs, statements, photos, searches" (*The Every* 128). Simultaneously, the most important people in the company, apart from Mae, have not gone transparent, and operate in a clandestine manner and employ methods that in the case of *The Circle* have been described as totalitarian (McKenna 87–89; Selisker 765; Sommer 61; Wasihun). This totalitarian aspect is strengthened in *The Every*, in which those in power, including Mae, frequently engage in conspiracies and deception. This includes a drone attack on a residential building on the Every campus which kills four people, and which Delaney believes may have been an inside job (*The Every* 492–493). Although she dismisses this view later, the reader need not do so: not only is she drug-addled at that moment, but the narrative shows her judgment to be flawed several times, most visible during her interactions with Gabriel Chu, who heads the Every's attempts at curtailing freedom of choice (177–180, 447–460, 476–3).

The lack of transparency within the company in light of its utopian promise and its totalitarian inclinations creates an ominous atmosphere. There are moments when tension between those in power, including

Gabriel and Stenton, is visible (*The Circle* 479–486; *The Every* 111, 223–224, 276, 401). Two of the Three Wise Men disappear or die in mysterious circumstances: Ty Gospodinov, who had moral doubts as to the company's actions, already was forbidden from leaving the campus in *The Circle* (480), and has disappeared completely (or has been disappeared) in *The Every* (111, 131), while Eamon Bailey dies when a brain implant he is presenting malfunctions (147–153). There are surprisingly few viewers of his feed (148), which in the context of the power struggle may suggest that he was assassinated. Such uncertainties and dubious circumstances engage readers in the aesthetics of paranoia, which arguably reach their pinnacle with the aforementioned drone strike, which occurs after a character states that Stenton, the final of the Three Wise Men, will attempt to secure power with a "Reichstag moment" (401). However, this struggle for power may be a ruse covering up the fact that Mae, Gabriel, and Stenton are actually closely collaborating, as suggested by her statement that they are her "stalwart partners" (576). Following such an interpretation, this deception is meant to reveal any internal opposition to the Every's policies that Mae sees as "a small tumor" that "need(s) to be excised" (575), which, in the context of the ominous disappearances and mysterious deaths, can be interpreted as physically eliminating them. Such clandestine activity proves that the slogans about truth, honesty, and transparency that Mae often returns to are nothing but mere marketing. The Every's higher-ups do not embrace such openness, but actively deceive others, and even engage in immoral and illicit behavior, best illustrated by Mae killing of Delaney, the novel's protagonist. In the Every, like in a totalitarian state, freedom is reserved for those in power.

The company is also attempts to limit the freedom of the masses, particularly freedom of choice and free will. It supports this initiative claiming that freedom of choice is stressful, a phenomenon Steven Waldman, and later Barry Schwartz, called the tyranny of choice. Waldman associated the concept with inept consumption, political alienation, and erosion of the sense of self. He also argued that it is an inhibitor of commitment and social bonding (361–366). However, rather than maintaining an awareness of this issue and limiting the number of redundant products on the market or providing clear and honest information about them, all issues with which Waldman and Schwartz were concerned, the Every sees this as an opportunity to do away with personal freedom in general in a manner that would benefit it financially. As Mae tells Delaney: "It's not that [people] want fewer choices. It's that they want almost *no* choices at all" (*The Every* 555). People indoctrinated by the company support

Mirosław Aleksander Miernik
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the idea of "less freedom" (503) and, despite seeing its negative aspects, argue for "the end of freedom and free will" that will "end the society of the self" and lead to "the birth of a more communitarian one" (470). Ultimately, personal freedom in the eyes of the company's ideology is, as one character says: "selfish. It's anarchic, really. It's anti-community. It's anti-social. It's anti-human" (467). Such rhetoric, bringing to mind Deneen's argumentation, vastly oversimplifies the problem, depicting individualism and communitarianism as unreconcilable, mutually exclusive opposites.

In order to achieve its goal of limiting the freedom of the masses, the Every engages in social engineering using its social platforms, facilitated by various aggregates and algorithms that effectively are black boxes that have been gamified to such a degree that they are uncritically accepted by the public. This is further buttressed by the weaponizing of social pressure that was already visible in *The Circle*, when Mae had enthusiasts of the company pursue her former boyfriend and tech hold-out, Mercer, driving him to suicide (452–461). The company rhetorically frames its actions by citing social justice or environmental protection, at the same time publicly shaming those who disagree with its strategies. Drawing on the utopian aspect of its rhetoric, Bailey argues that this is to facilitate human improvement, and should not be seen as shaming (288–289). However, this approach changes in the time lapse between *The Circle* and *The Every*, when the company openly embraces the practice: it introduces the idea of shams, "a bastard mash of Samaritan and shame," which exposed "swervy drivers, loud gym grunters, Louvre line-cutters, single-use-plastic-users, and blithe allowers of infants-crying-in-public." Shams are used in one's Shame Aggregate, a quotient representing the effective "morality" of one's conduct (*The Every* 9).

Such enforcement of company-sanctioned morality is conducted by driving hysterical reactions to any behavior that it frames as improper by employing the discourse of constant cataclysm to provoke strong emotional reactions that intensify social pressure but leave little room for discussion or criticism. In extreme cases, its methods lead to the adoption of a lynching mentality (*The Circle* 450–451). This strategy is used to implement milestones on the Every's road towards the "Consensual Economic Order" in which it is to become a "benevolent monopoly" (563) where all consumer decisions would be dictated by it (555–570). Such hysterical reactions are guided by the coddling morality it employs, claiming to protect the masses from anything it frames as dangerous or offensive. As a result, employees of the company are incapable of coping with reality, which is best exemplified

by a trip to the coast to observe elephant seals. Learning that most of the pups will not survive into adulthood, a number of complaints against Delaney, the trip's organizer, are filed citing emotional damage. These complaints do not only pertain to the survival rate of elephant seals, but also the means of transportation, park rangers, and even parking lots (*The Every* 251–254), all of which are shocking for the company's employees who live a sheltered life on the Every campus.

All three novels discussed in this article tackle the asymmetrical distribution of freedom one finds in contemporary neoliberal capitalism, highlighting the stark division between most US citizens and people in positions of power in large companies and corporations whose actions are carried out with the desire to increase profits, regardless of the costs. This leads to an unstable and unsustainable economy which shows little to no consideration for the national interest or the well-being of Americans. *A Hologram for a King*, which is a parable of the downfall of the American dream in a globalized, neoliberal economy, contradicts the association of neoliberalism with freedom by emphasizing not only how the system privileges the wealthy, but also how neoliberal practices actively limit one's freedom and hamper the ideal of equality of opportunity.

The duology of *The Circle* and *The Every* looks at the threat of the masses literally becoming enthralled by social media to the extent that they surrender their freedom and individuality for a digital implementation of Orwellian groupthink. This is accomplished through mass surveillance, social engineering, and weaponizing the masses against dissenters by using the rhetoric of social improvement, further facilitating the novels' dystopian and totalitarian aspects. Although the books, particularly *The Every*, are heavy-handed in their message, the reality which they describe is not that far removed from the practices of wealthy CEOs of technological companies such as Mark Zuckerberg or Elon Musk, who, despite paying lip-service to ideals of freedom, simultaneously limit liberties on the platforms they own and allow for the distribution of socially dangerous disinformation (see, for example, Ortutay and Klepper; Tangalakis-Lippert). However, Eggers neglects the growing incredulity towards social media, along with the progressive deterioration of the quality of the products in the name of increasing profits, an idea Cory Doctorow dubbed "enshittification" ("The 'Enshittification' of TikTok"; "Social Quitting"), which slowly drives people away from such platforms.

In these novels, Eggers inverts the idea propagated by neoliberal economists such as Milton Friedman, who claimed that the culling of state regulation will lead business to self-regulate in a manner that

promotes freedom and benefits all, an idea that has greatly appealed to tech entrepreneurs. However, this never happens, and Eggers shows the reverse to be true: the logic of neoliberal capitalism and its rhetoric of freedom and prosperity for all is actually used to restrict individual freedoms and manipulate people. However, I think it would be an overinterpretation to see Eggers' novels as opposed to capitalism in general; nowhere does he engage in a wide-ranging criticism of the system. At times, he even shows support for the idea of small businesses and New Deal policies, an issue best illustrated on Alan's discussions with his unionist father, the depiction of Mae's parents, or Mercer and his small business. By highlighting the abuses of neoliberal capitalism in terms of freedom, Eggers' novels argue that people's liberties need to be guaranteed by a balanced legal system that is uninfluenced by monied interests.

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Abstract: The article focuses on the discursive use of freedom in the context of neoliberal capitalism in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*, *A Hologram for the King* and *The Every*. Taking into account the importance of this concept in the context of the American history and national identity, it argues that despite claims that this form of capitalism promotes freedom, it actually privileges economic freedom over personal and political liberties, leading to the rise of inequalities already prophesized by Alexis de Tocqueville. In this context *A Hologram for the King* emphasizes the discord between the promise of neoliberalism and its practical implementation, which reveals that rather than promote freedom, this form of capitalism establishes structural barriers that obstruct social mobility. With regard to *The Circle* and *The Every*, the article analyzes how the eponymous company draws on ideals of freedom in order not only to increase their revenue and monopolize the market, but also establish a digital panopticon that infringes on personal freedoms and privacy, even though the companies themselves operate in secrecy.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, capitalism, privacy, Dave Eggers, *The Circle*, *The Every*, *A Hologram for the King*.

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