

Film Review of "The Circle"

By

Helmut E. Reinhardt & Josephine A. Ruggiero

Based on the 2013 book of the same name by Dave Eggers, the film "The Circle" (released on 4/28/17) is similar to a sci-fi piece with a heavy dose of reality. Although the viewer's *take* on this movie will likely be affected by generational differences, there are some chilling moments for older viewers who were raised in an era where privacy was much more valued than it appears to be today. This movie explores what can go wrong and what can go right for society in light of advancing technological changes, their consequences, and implications. The central issues "The Circle" covers are complete and unfettered transparency of behavior in a "no secrets" society where people are encouraged, and are willing, to give up their privacy. The complete invasion of privacy even extends to installing cameras in bathroom stalls.

Mae Holland, played by Emma Watson, is drawn into this circle, a working-living community based loosely on the Apple campus. Through a friend who works at the Circle, Mae is hired as a customer service representative there. This is a full-time job that she really wants to keep. For some reason, perhaps because of her youthful enthusiasm, Mae attracts the attention of Eamon Bailey, one of the Circle's founders, played by Tom Hanks. As the movie progresses, Mae becomes closer to the inner circle where important decisions are made.

Movie viewers learn about a series of initiatives developed by the Circle. These initiatives include SeaChange, having cameras positioned everywhere even on the ocean, interlinking family history with medical advances and SoulSearch, a tool for finding both lost family and friends and locating criminals who have gone "off the grid."

In the first initiative, Mae agrees to wear a camera during the day (similar to the movie "Truman" starring Jim Carrey) and let the world see her interacting with

her co-workers and friends. Unfortunately, with good intentions, Mae shows the circle of friends and the world, a chandelier her friend, Mercer Medeiros created, made of antlers discarded by reindeers after the mating season. Comments were made by viewers who did not know Mercer, or how he got the deer antlers, that he was an animal killer. Another downside of having cameras everywhere, including in Mae's parents' home, was her inadvertent entry into her parents' bedroom while they were being intimate.

All of these sound like initiatives which can have positive implications. However, even with a seemingly good idea like SoulSearch, things can and do go very wrong. For example, when Mae is pressed to locate Mercer, played by Ellar Coltrane (who has chosen to go off the grid to work), she agrees reluctantly to an experiment at the request of the audience to find him. Within a short period of time, Mercer, who did not want to be found, was located at a wooded cabin. He was hounded by drones, cameras, probes, and people in cars until he met his demise driving off a bridge.

But the main message of the film is for Mae to allow complete transparency of her daily routines to everyone, including the leaders of the Circle. However, the same rules about secrets do not apply to the founders. Toward the end of the movie, Mae reveals to the world that they also had dark secrets. Very telling is the statement by the other founder of the Circle, Tom Stenton, played by Patton Oswalt, to Eamon Bailey, "We're f----". The implication is no one is immune, not even those at the top. No more secrets, no more back room deals or no more dirty deals.

Currently, societies (mostly the more developed countries with links to technology) are in the beginning stages of "The Circle," but the less developed countries lag behind those already developed. Even Europe is

only about 25% “connected.” Europeans in general still value privacy, direct interpersonal relations, and a less, hectic world. For example, few of Helmut’s cousins in Europe have computers, cell phones, or mobile devices, citing cost and the “trivialization of daily life” (e.g., got to know, got to ask about everything, including what I or you had for breakfast). The worst downside of “The Circle” is the overload on everyone’s life, the complete encompassing of a “Knowing-Everything Society.” Even without our permission, others are posting private information about us on the internet. Whether we like it or not, our personal identities no longer exist.

About the Reviewers: **Helmut E. Reinhardt**, M. Ed, is a frequent contributor to *Sociology between the Gaps (SBG)*. In addition to founding and serving as Editor in Chief of *SBG*, **Josephine A. Ruggiero**, Ph.D., Professor Emerita of Sociology, is a specialist in the field of social change and futurist issues. She developed and taught courses in social change during her four-decades long undergraduate teaching career.