

“The Circle” and a World of Total Transparency - Movie Review

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May 8, 2017



Is it possible to go too far with our digital technologies? Is total transparency a good thing? If the majority of people in the world were digitally connected and our lives were out in the open, could we have a better, safer world? Are people ready to live in a totally transparent, digital world?

The new film, “The Circle,” attempts to answer these questions. “The Circle” focuses on a young woman, Mae Holland (Emma Watson), who lands an entry-level job in customer service at the Circle, a massive, powerful tech conglomerate, through a good friend who works in the company. Imagine

Google, Facebook and Amazon all rolled into one company. That’s the Circle.

Eamon Bailey (Tom Hanks), CEO and co-founder of the Circle, is an energetic and charismatic leader who appeals to the idealism of his employees -- all of whom seem to be under the age of 35. With the personality of a Steve Jobs/Mark Zuckerberg, Bailey and his COO and co-founder, Tom Stenton (Patton Oswalt), emphasize transparency and accountability with each new digital breakthrough they unveil. Much like the practice in today’s big tech firms, there is a regular company-wide gathering in which the new innovative breakthrough of the day is showcased and employees can cheer and marvel as their company pushes the boundaries of technology without questioning it.



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Mae is drawn deeper and deeper into the Circle. Bailey is good at coming up with catchy names and phrases and selling the new tech innovations through personal stories that touch the emotions and ignite the idealism of his employees – most especially Mae. In her first week on the job, she is introduced to a webcam the size of a marble that is heralded as a means to a totally transparent world where no one can get away with discrimination, human rights abuses or crime, dubbed “Sea Change.” Bailey’s catchphrase is, “Knowing is good but knowing everything is better.”

Shortly after the launch of Sea Change, a U.S. senator trying to open an investigation against Bailey is forced out of office due to seemingly questionable actions unearthed by Circle technology operating under the guise of transparency. Mae and her colleagues see this as a reason to celebrate their company’s role in making a change for the better.

We come to see that the Circle is far more than just a company whose workers go home at night. It is a total community composed of a few hundred employees all working on a campus that rivals the size of any major university. Like with Google, employees have access to a wide range of perks and benefits from parties to support groups and health and fitness programs. Employees are strongly encouraged to become fully engaged in these diverse programs.

Though reticent at first, Mae quickly finds herself totally immersed in company activities each day of the week. She soon learns that everyone at the Circle knows almost everything about each other and their families. It isn’t until a disastrous kayaking experience late one night in which Mae is rescued thanks to “Sea Change” cameras that she has an epiphany. Realizing that total transparency is good and keeping secrets is not good, Mae agrees to make her life totally transparent by being completely surrounded 24/7 by cameras, essentially inviting the vast global network of Circle customers to live with her day and night.

Tweets, emails and messages become a constant for Mae. She is invited to join a planning meeting of upper management so everyone can see how transparent and open the Circle is. Throughout the ups and downs of being constantly “on,” the key people in her life begin to question whether or not total transparency is a good thing, and start to question the ethics of the Circle’s leadership. It’s at this point that Mae has her second epiphany. Since Circle customers are everywhere in the world, why not use the Circle’s massive technological resources and power to find dangerous criminals on the run or find loved ones with whom one has lost track? Isn’t this reason enough to keep pushing the digital envelope?

Now that she has become a good cheerleader for the company, Mae is asked to introduce this new innovation to the Circle’s employees. In full view of the company and its clients around the world, a woman convicted of murder who has been on the run is located and re-arrested. On the heels of the adrenaline high, Mae demonstrates the use of the technology to find a lost friend. Unfortunately, it becomes personal when the test case chosen by the employees is a friend of Mae’s. In the process, he is tragically killed while fleeing those who “found” him, causing Mae to step away and reassess her role in

his death and whether or not she went too far with the technology and drive for transparency. Her introspection leads, though, to a most intriguing conclusion.

The film does not seek to provide any clear answers to the moral and ethical questions it raises. The fact Mae and those at the Circle or its clients did not really lose their idealism leads one to wonder if the film is just playing it safe in this regard. Or is it because there is no simple answer to these questions concerning total transparency and whether or not being a fully wired planet will create a safer world? I am not sure.



The official trailer for "The Circle" (courtesy STX Entertainment and EuropaCorp).

The pairing of Tom Hanks and Emma Watson works well for this film. Watson's seeming innocence and naïveté and Hanks' ability to make a character believable and trustworthy add to the thought-provoking quality of the film. Although it was not their best performances, the film did make me think. Any film that makes me continue the discussion and debate on my walk home from the theater is not a failure.

Who wouldn't be swayed by an argument that paints a picture of a connected world, which brings out the *Imago Dei* in each of us; where violence, abuse and social injustice can be stopped and maybe even prevented. This image certainly appeals to my feminine perspective and sensibilities. In this way, I identify with Mae's unfaltering idealism. Nor can I fault the value of transparency and accountability. On the other hand, I also have images of George Orwell's *1984* and "Big Brother is watching," and fear that with such pervasive, powerful technology, how can we resist this dangerous path?

When all is said and done, I'm glad the film offers no clear answers. The film leaves things wide open so each of us has to think for ourselves. While I'm not sure everyone in the theater appreciated that decision, I saw people talking about it as they left and could almost hear the wheels turning in their heads. On my walk home, had anyone heard me, I'm sure they would have thought me one of those "odd" people who talk to themselves. But it was only me trying to work out how I would answer these deep questions.

I asked myself, "Would we dare to have cameras on us day and night and live so completely transparent?" My answer? I am not sure the world is ready for that.

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"The Circle" (rated PG-13) is currently in theaters. Running time: 110 minutes. Directed by James Ponsoldt; written by James Ponsoldt and Dave Eggers. Main cast: Emma Watson, Tom Hanks, John Boyega, Patton Oswalt, and Bill Paxton. See IMDB for full details.

Photo at top: Tom Hanks, Emma Watson and Patton Oswalt in a scene from "The Circle" (courtesy STX Entertainment and EuropaCorp).