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‘The Circle’ taps into surveillance culture angst

Tom Hanks makes totalitarianism charming as a Steve Jobs proxy with a hidden agenda

“Ninety percent of you out there allow people to know everything about you by turning on geo-tracking on your phone. I am in the 10 percent because I know what they do with that data,” admonished the queen of cognitive technology, IBM CEO Ginni Rometty, in a May 1 speech to the tuxed and coiffed crowd at the Economic Club of Chicago.

She should know. Her warning resonates in the reservoirs of anxiety that reside in the national consciousness.

“The Circle,” adapted from the 2013 Dave Eggers novel that taps into this well, does nothing to allay the angst. Its message is that we have released into our culture a Pandora’s box of technological entanglements that we don’t fully understand and have no idea how to control, or even influence.

To confuse matters, the villains and antiheroes of the

movie, as is often true in life, are people we trust. Tom Hanks is Eamon Bailey, the charismatic CEO of a monolithic Silicon Valley social media company, The Circle, headquartered on a futuristic ring-shaped campus. His “atta girl” style of spouting unprovable axioms — “sharing is caring” and “without secrets and the hoarding of knowledge we can reach our potential” — makes the totalitarian seem aspirational.

He’s a charming, avuncular bad guy. That’s how they getcha.

Comedian Patton Oswalt as Tom Stenton, is The Circle’s henchman COO.

The third, unnamed, villain in this film is the crowd. Insatiable in their curiosity and merciless in their intrusion, the collective citizens of the web-verse know no boundaries — they are a mob.

Into this ripe environment steps millennial ingénue Mae



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(Emma Watson) who works in the collections call center at a water company. Through a friend, she lands a job in the “customer experience” department of The Circle.

She moves from her parents’ (Glenn Headly and the late Bill Paxton, in his final role) home in a ramshackle neighborhood, barely a step up from a trailer park, to The Circle’s campus housing.

Circle employees complacently grind away under the company’s enforced theology of transparency. They are pressured to join affinity groups and fraternize with other Circleers. Meetings and social events are monitored for attendance. E-mails are meticulously analyzed.

This cult of constant exposure does not extend to Bailey and Stenton, however, who shield

themselves behind protective screens of access codes and non-disclosure agreements, as they use data to control their adversaries.

When Bailey announces the introduction of a new Circle product, SeeChange, he paces the stage, as Steve Jobs used to do, in front of a giant screen at a company assembly. SeeChange is a camera the size of a marble that can be hidden anywhere. As Bailey speaks, SeeChange cameras are already posted pretty much everywhere. “Now the entire world is watching,” Bailey exclaims with faux humility. “Knowing is good. Knowing everything is better.”

The balance of the movie is devoted to proving him wrong. Mae joins forces with the mysterious third founder of The Circle who has gone rogue, Ty Lafitte (John Boyega), as the two try to turn the tables on the tormentors.

Although “The Circle” has many elements of a successful movie, it feels flat and lacking in energy. As a cautionary tale, it nags rather than inspires. Perhaps this is because, as Rometty suggested, 90 percent of us have already given up the fight. Our apathy consoles our ignorance.

Still, as we tap away our privacy, disclosing our whereabouts, our history and our innermost thoughts in exchange for mailbox spam and pizza delivery, there is one takeaway from “The Circle” that shouldn’t be ignored: When the crowd becomes a swarm, it will devour you.