

The Circle (2017)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 50 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 1; Language 2 ;
Sex/Nudity 2.

Our star rating (1-5): 4.5

*For God alone my soul waits in silence;
from him comes my salvation.*

Psalms 62:1

*But when you pray, go into your own room, shut your door and
pray to your Father privately.*

Matthew 5:6 J.B. Phillips

*But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad;
many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their
diseases. 16 But he would withdraw to deserted places and
pray.*

Luke 5:15

This film about True Believers, directed by James Ponsoldt and adapted by Ponsoldt and Dave Eggers from the latter's novel, is fascinating and chilling. Those using social networking, which probably includes all who read this review, should take the film as a cautionary tale.

Mae (Emma Watson) is the daughter of a loving couple (Glenn Headly and the late Bill Paxton), her father being homebound due to his MS affliction. Through her friend Annie (Karen Gillan) she secures an entry-level job at Circle, a tech giant similar to Facebook and Google, located in the San Francisco Bay area. Thanks to its innovative program TruYou, it dominates the Internet. TruYou simplifies Internet use because

the user has a single-identity, one-password solution for everything he or she does on line. This, of course, means that users give up their on-line anonymity, but few object, with TruYou allowing such easy access to the sought for information or shopping. As Mae says, "The chaos of the web made simple."

The company is run by charismatic Eamon Bailey (Tom Hanks), a Steve Jobs with charm, and Tom Stenton (Patton Oswalt), who provides the business wiz. The company is held in such awe by the public, and with frenzied adulation by its employees, that Mae feels privileged to have been accepted. She is swept along at her first Dream Friday, a company-wide pep rally at which Eamon links the success of their company to the welfare of the country. He wows everyone with his announcement of a tiny camera made at low cost, which could be placed everywhere so that nothing can be hidden anymore. Thus is launched the slogan, "Knowing is good. Knowing everything is better." A politician currying favor joins forces with the company by promising to introduce legislation that will place cameras virtually everywhere, including in the rooms where Congressmen meet. However, another Congressperson seeks to investigate Circle and its near monopoly in its field, because she fears its growing power.

Mae had liked to go kayaking alone in the Bay, but she soon learns this is deviant behavior for a Circle employee when two colleagues interrogate her because she did not participate in one of the many weekend activities sponsored by Circle. They are smiling, but there is an underlying menace behind those smiles and their "suggestions" concerning her behavior. At a party that she does attend Mae drifts from cluster to cluster. Another figure also looking on from the fringe is Ty (John Boyega), who befriends her, revealing that he is the inventor of TruYou, but is not pleased that it is taking away personal privacy. They leave the party, he conducting her down into a tunnel where he shows her what the future might be. In his eyes it is not a pleasant one.

Catching the attention of Eamon, Mae rises in the company's ranks, especially when she announces that she will begin wearing one of Circle's body cameras every hour of the day, turning it off only when in the toilet. She was made a true believer when she almost drowned one misty night while kayaking, a large ship capsizing her tiny vessel. It was the tiny camera in a buoy that had alerted the authorities to her predicament so that they dispatched a helicopter to rescue her. Almost instantly most of the Internet-using population follow Mae through the day. Thousands of encouraging notes are posted, their contents being shown in bubbles on the screen.

This has unintended personal consequences, in the first case embarrassing, and the second tragic. She often converses with her parents during a week, but in one instance she catches them engaged in bedroom sex, the image of which is sent to hundreds of millions of her followers. The public is understanding and supportive. But not so in the case of her boyfriend Mercer (Ellar Coltrane), an anti-tech individualist who prefers being outdoors to sitting in front of a screen. As she rose in the ranks at Circle, Mercer had stopped communicating with her, setting off by himself into the mountains. Mae had just shown how the users of the worldwide web could locate and track a wanted criminal. Now she asks that her followers find Mercer, which sets off a chain of events leading to tragedy. For a time, the grieving Mae turns off her camera.

Mae emerges from her seclusion, deciding...well, you can find out. Another of her ideas that supposedly will benefit the country, as well as enrich The Circle, is making voting and signing onto Circle synonymous. No more obstacles to voting. What could go wrong by making this a transparent democracy? Well, the filmmakers apparently are concerned about harmful possibilities. Are we becoming like the members of Jonesboro, so enamored with our leaders and our seductive technology that we will drink the Kool-Aid that will kill all privacy?

The cast is excellent, with Emma Watson very convincing as the sincere and creative, but naïve, Mae. And where could you find a more likable actor to play technology's Pied Piper wowing and leading the public astray than Tom Hanks? (He was equally sincere in his role *A Hologram for the King* as a tech executive peddling his high-tech wares in Saudi Arabia.) This film is an intellectual thriller that offers convincing arguments for and against technology's posing a threat to privacy. There is no doubt the social media adds much richness to our lives, enabling us to keep in touch with family and friends (with that latter word stretched to a possible breaking point in Face Book!)—but what is the price, and what impact will that price have on human freedom in the brave new world? In a world in which there is no privacy what do you do about Jesus' admonition to pray in private, And if in those pre-electronic days when word of mouth made Jesus so well-known that it became difficult for him to move about, is it any wonder that Mae's publicity shy boyfriend wound up as he did? This is a timely film ideal for a group of young adults to ponder and discuss!

This review with a set of questions will be in the June 2017 issue of VP.