

Parallels between the Present-day American Establishment and Orwell's *1984*

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It is sometimes said that Americans are living in an Orwellian society. I'd venture to say that ever since George Orwell first wrote and published *1984*, this sentiment has been applied not only to the United States, but to many advanced nations. It expresses the accuracy of Orwell's predicted consequences of technological advancements, the freedom and suppression of information, life in a surveillance society, and what Orwell termed "reality control" (Orwell, 1950, p.35).

Are Americans living in a society similar to the one in which *1984*'s protagonist, Winston Smith, finds himself? The short answer, I believe, is "yes, in certain ways". However, a better question, and one which this paper sets out to explore, is in *which ways* do American society and rule, mirror that of Orwell's Oceania? By virtue of recent newsworthy revelations, we can better explore this question than was even possible only a few months ago.

These revelations are predominantly via a Guardian produced video interview with Edward Snowden; a former employee of Booz Allen Hamilton, which a management consulting firm used by the United States government for the purposes of intelligence acquisition ("NSA Whistleblower" 2013).

Incidentally, Snowden is somewhat analogous to the character of Goldstein in *1984*, in that both held relatively privileged positions that granted them access to information withheld from the general public, both fell from the graces of their respective governments, both seem to be "advocating freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and freedom of thought", and both "mysteriously escaped and disappeared" to avoid the wrath of those they exposed (p.12).

Snowden, of course, is a real person, with a real life, who must bear very real consequences. For this reason, I hesitate to cavalierly compare him with a fictional character. I merely want to illustrate

that both he and Goldstein advocate a certain level of freedom in regard to what citizens know about their own government. That's as far as I hope the reader feels compelled to take the analogy.

There is a very real danger in exposing the secrets of those in power. This is a theme underlying the entire length of Orwell's novel, and a trending development in modern-day America. One must simply look at the case of Chelsea Elizabeth Manning (formerly Bradley Edward Manning) who was recently sentenced to 35 years in prison for the crime of espionage. More specifically, for relaying the fact that the U.S. military was committing war crimes in Iraq (Lewis, 2013).

It's a controversial case, and the nuances of whether justice was served is beyond the scope of this paper, but one thing is certain: exposing the crimes were a bigger offence in the eyes of the American government, than the crimes themselves; the perpetrators were left unpunished, while Manning was convicted on five counts of espionage ("Why Bradley Manning" 2013). The punishment meted out for the dissemination of information, versus the lack thereof for the war crimes themselves is indicative of the U.S. government's priorities regarding information: controlling and limiting it to only those at the top is of the utmost importance.

In Orwell's Oceania, the danger that information and knowledge pose, is slightly different than that of the American establishment. The control of information in Oceania dictates the extent to which the Inner Party can control individuals' conceptions of reality. Unlike 2013, it isn't just certain pieces of classified information that is withheld, but *any* information that counters the reality that the Party propagates. "Who controls the past," runs the Party slogan, "controls the future: who controls the present controls the past" (p. 34). If the Party changes a position on policy, than all tangible evidence of the former opinion must be stamped out of existence. (p.

40)

The ability to control individuals' conceptions of past events may seem pure fiction to us today. We seem to have great stock in our individual memories, our collective ones, and the understanding that written records and recorded histories are not controlled to the extent to which they are in *1984*.

Perhaps it is only this freedom over our conceptions of the past that separate us from the citizens of Oceania, with their malleable memories. If "all that [is] needed [is] an unending series of victories over your own memory," a lack of these collective conceptions could be the tipping point to a society more like that of Oceania. (p. 35)

We aren't there yet, and hopefully never will be. However, societies like that of North Korea, with its firm grip on what you and I deem external truths, may be surprisingly close to achieving a control over individuals' memories, and hence, a practice of "reality control" somewhat on par with Oceania.

Word has it that the Supreme Leader, Kim Il Sung, scored a perfect game when bowling – always ("20 facts" 2013). I can't see any reason to believe that he didn't bowl. And when he did bowl, he certainly racked up *some* score. In North Korea, when it comes to every State-sanctioned written account of what that score was, could it be that "the past was erased, the erasure forgotten, [and] the lie became truth"? (p. 75)

Re-writing history is the protagonist's work in *1984*. Of course, the party is careful in the wording of Winston Smith's task. It was "never stated or implied that an act of forgery was to be committed; always the reference was to slips, errors, misprints, or misquotations which it was necessary to put right in the interest of accuracy" (p. 40).

In 2013, the type of reality control practiced by those in power in the U.S. is similar, yet much more subtle than that of *1984*. It would probably be more accurate to label it "perception control". It consists of relabeling off-putting concepts and ideas with more palatable terms. "Torture", which carries a high level of negativity, is changed to "enhanced interrogation techniques", which appears to be much more humane. The actual practice remains the same – a war crime – but less people will oppose that same practice when the new term is substituted. A "kill list" becomes a "disposition matrix." When the American government wants to downplay the fact that personnel from one of its embassies had to escape unrest outside its doors,

"evacuate" was changed to "a reduction in staffing" – it sounds less dire. ("NSA Twists Words" 2013)

Similarly, when a political idea becomes unpopular among Americans, it can spell disaster for those politicians pushing those agendas. In a democracy, those pushing unpopular policies lose elections – or that's the idea. However, if a certain policy is rebranded, the same Americans that opposed it before, may come to support it, unaware that behind the new term lies the very same policy. Frank Luntz, who is the top pollster for one of the two most influential political parties in America, is often called a wordsmith ("GOP Pollster" 2013). For decades he's been controlling their dialogue, according to how favorable or unfavorable terms poll with voters. The "wealthy" are re-termed "job-creators". "Capping spending" is a term the spells danger for social programs, but changing it to "controlling spending" gives the same policy an air of responsibility.

For years, the idea of "tax cuts" were well supported, until the term became synonymous with a failed economic theory known as "trickle-down economics," which postulates that extra income flows from the wealthy to the poor. It was used as a justification for lower tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans. The idea termed "tax cuts" has since been re-branded as "tax reform" and once again as "taxes that are simpler, flatter, and fairer" ("GOP Pollster"). It's the same policy, but the unwary won't *perceive* it as such, unless they keep abreast of what these terms are coded to mean by wordsmiths like Luntz.

One last example from this same source, before I relate all of this to the treatment of language in Orwell's novel. The idea to "cut social security and Medicare" is largely unpopular among the middle-class, so it has been re-termed "control and limit the growth of [entitlement] programs." When this term polled low among potential voters, "strengthening entitlement programs" became the new talking point those in power were encouraged to use. These terms that warrant change are referred to as "language errors". These "errors" are an inconvenience to the policy makers that use them in speeches and to the media, in that they convey a certain amount of truth as to the policies they represent. The new terms are known as "adjustments", and are more likely to misguide ("GOP Pollster"). The practice amounts to creating language that conveys less truth, in turn making deception easier.

This practice can be seen in a section of *1984*, quoted above. Here it is again:

“...never stated or implied that an act of forgery was to be committed; always the reference was to slips, errors, misprints, or misquotations which it was necessary to put right in the interest of accuracy” (p. 40).

If one were to describe Smith's occupation of altering the past as “forgery”, it would be disastrous. There's negative connotations to the word “forgery”, and frankly it too truthfully describes what he does at work. That is, there's too much truth in the word. It would be deemed a “language error”. For this reason the “adjustments” to this term are “references...to [*correcting*] slips, errors, misprints,” and “misquotations” (p. 40). “Correcting” does indeed sound better to my ears than “forgery”.

Another parallel in Orwell's dystopia is the creation by the Party of “Newspeak”. Conversely, the language of the proletariat – “the proles” – is “Oldspeak”, and one consequence is that it's wordy. As the character of Syme explains in regard to the move from Oldspeak to Newspeak, the Party is “destroying words – scores of them, everyday. [They're] cutting the language to the bone” (p. 51).

However, efficiency is not the real reason for this alteration. “Newspeak was designed not to extend but to *diminish* the range of thought, and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum” (p. 300).

When it comes to the type and breadth of the control over language practiced in modern-day America, and that which is practiced in *1984*, a perfect parallel it is not. However, the fundamental similarity is the important one: thought control and deception. Whether we are talking a more absolute control as in Oceania, or a more subtle one concerning an individual's perceptions of an idea, both are forms of thought control. Both are meant to alter language, so as not to convey truth, but to deceive.

This brings us to the last, and most significant, parallel between the novel and the United States; spying. As mentioned before, references to America's policies concerning surveillance nearly all come from the leaks of Edward Snowden. I want to point out that the legality of the practices exposed by Snowden is beyond the scope of this paper. What is happening at the present, according to these leaks, is all we need to know in order to appreciate the peculiar similarities between our own society and *1984*'s Oceania.

The spying of Big Brother on everyone in

Oceania is one of the central themes of *1984*. “Big Brother Is Watching You,” the Party slogan goes (p. 2). It perfectly sums up, in one sentence, the plight of the citizens in Oceania. It just about answers the question, “what is *1984* about?”

Today, the term “Big Brother”, is nearly synonymous with those in power; be it a government or any organization that oversees. It's a concept that is the antithesis of that of personal privacy – of *any* privacy.

However, the world in which Orwell crafted his vision was very different than the one of today. Technologically speaking, we're in a place so advanced, that nobody from our own 1984 could fathom the leaps and bounds by which technology has taken us, much less anyone from Orwell's days. Why, Orwell writes of “ear trumpets for listening through keyholes,” to give an example of some of the low-tech aspects of spying in his dystopia (p. 63).

Yet there is one device – one central to almost every aspect of the story; from Winston Smith's personal struggles, to the struggles of the entire society – that Orwell could hardly have imaged more accurately: the telescreen. Essentially a television with a monitoring camera, which “could be dimmed, but there was no way of shutting it off completely” (p. 2).

“The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously,” and is the means by which Big Brother and the party use to surveil Oceania's citizens. Being present in the living space of anyone of consequence, “you had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized” (p. 3).

The consequence of the receiving function of this piece of technology is two-fold. First, it gathers information – that's obvious. But in addition to this, it influences one's behavior at every single moment, because “there [is] of course no way of knowing whether you [are] being watched at any given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plug in on any individual wire [is] guesswork” (p. 3).

The lack of knowledge of *when* you are being watched, coupled with the knowledge that at any moment you *may* be being watched, have far reaching psychological consequences on the people of Oceania. One of the more interesting and pertinent consequences of this relates to the idea of control.

It forces the individual to endlessly, constantly, and tirelessly exert self-control over their every action,

or face punishment. And because the proper actions of individuals are dictated by the party, it allows the party to control how you control yourself.

“Self-control”, by its very definition, implies the freedom to govern one’s own person in a way they, themselves, see fit. And through the ever-present danger the telescreen poses, one could say that it effectively allows the Party to usurp one’s right to self-govern.

However, the reality is worse. “Usurp” has the nuance of “actively taking.” The Party is quite passive in this scenario. Why, they are merely watching. It is the individual that actively forsakes their will, their right to self-govern, and their whole physical being, for those of an authority that may not even be watching (p. 3).

Let’s now look at today – 2013. One the most – perhaps *the* most – life changing developments in relatively recent years is the computer. Computing ushered in more efficient communications, idea (read “information”) transfer that is literally the speed of light, and has brought an astounding level of convenience. These examples are only a fraction of the far-reaching impact that computing has had on our world.

Let’s take a look at a typical computer – the one I’m working on at this very moment. To borrow a few terms from page 3 of *1984*, it “receive[s] and transmit[s] simultaneously.” It is essentially an incredibly advanced telescreen. It even has a little video camera next to the screen like Oceania’s telescreens, and a built in microphone.

Unlike Winston Smith, I can turn it off, yet I often leave it on for hours on end. Until recently, my assumptions of personal privacy, what they were, I believed that what I did on my machine was, indeed, private. I did assume certain dubious activities; a search for explosive recipes, for instance, may send up a red-flag somewhere, and in turn compromise that privacy. However, barring that, I believed my everyday activities were private. I think many people believed as I did.

This belief was eroded when Edward Snowden forfeited his position of authority, for the ideals of truth and transparency (“NSA Whistleblower” 2013). Prior to his revelations, he lived a life that is, at least to a degree, analogous to those lives of those belonging to the Inner Party of Oceania. Power, money, knowledge, and all the benefits that come with being a part of the powerful in society were his to enjoy, in much of the same way they are enjoyed by O’Brien – the power wielding human face of the Inner Party, who ultimately breaks Winston Smith (p.169).

Snowden’s leaks revealed “that telecom carriers have been secretly giving the National Security Agency information about Americans’ phone calls, and that the N.S.A. has been capturing e-mail and other private communications from Internet companies as part of a secret program called Prism” (Granick & Sprigman, 2013).

It provides evidence that the NSA has been gathering “phone record metadata on all [mobile phone] customers, and probably on every American, going back seven years. This metadata is extremely revealing... [and] might be able to infer whether we have an illness or an addiction, what our religious affiliations and political activities are, and so on (Granick & Sprigman, 2013). In other words, the NSA has access to one’s personal information, to a degree on par with that of Oceania.

A powerful program known as XKeyscore, “is [the NSA’s] ‘widest-reaching’ system” not only can inform the American government, via the NSA, every person who has visited a certain website, it gathers “with no prior authorization through vast databases containing emails, online chats and the browsing histories of millions of individuals” (“EVERYTHING” 2013). It collects and stores this data, using “over 700 servers around the world from 170 sites.” Phone numbers, address books, http addresses, indexes, webmail chat activities, usernames, buddy-lists, and cookies stored on anyone’s computer are also gathered and stored using XKeyscore (“XKeyscore” 2013).

These programs don’t target specific individuals, though they can, but instead collect in bulk. It’s a level of mass surveillance that Big Brother would envy, with the unfathomable amount of data that the programs are able to pull in and store. Moreover, it comes with an efficiency and effortlessness, to which the Thought Police of Oceania, human limitations being what they are, could never compete. All of this information, all of *our* information, is stored in massive databases. The NSA keeps it for a period of time, which, in theory, could allow them to do retrospective analyses on each one of us (Savage, 2013).

I say “in theory”, as the NSA maintains that they don’t make retrospective analyses on this personal information at present. It remains at their disposal, however; to be used for some undefined future purpose, it seems. “Just in case,” as the expression goes.

In any case, according to those collecting this information, “bulk collection” itself, is a misnomer. Yes,

they are collecting information en masse, and storing it in bulk, but it is the very absence of retrospective analysis they maintain, that makes the term “bulk collection” a misnomer in expressing what they are doing. It’s an important distinction, as how “bulk collection” is defined means the difference between a violation of a U.S. citizen’s rights, and not. I’ve covered how those in power twist the meanings of words and terms for their own agenda. This is a prime example of just how far reaching, and to what depths, the consequences of redefining generally unambiguous terms can have on policy (Savage, 2013).

If you need yet another example of wordsmithing, let’s let look at the term to “target” someone. The NSA denies that it “targets” U.S. citizens’ information within the borders. Though, as was reported in the New York Times, the NSA is searching the contents of vast amounts of Americans’ e-mail and text communications into and out of the country... [as well as] casting a far wider net for people who cite information linked to those in foreign countries” in emails and other communications (Savage, 2013).

Because the information is taken en masse, from everyone, the NSA believes that Americans are not being “targeted”, in the sense that an individual person outside the country is said to be. That is, because of the practice of “bulk collection”, individuals need not worry that their data is being targeted.

So the position seems to be, the NSA collects and stores everyone’s information and as such isn’t “targeting” Americans, though this storing is not considered “Bulk Collection” because there is no retrospective analysis of the stored data.

In closing, there appear to be disconcerting similarities between *1984*, and the American establishment of today. It’s ironic to think that this paper would never have been written, had the U.S. government been able to exert just a bit more control over one of its own. Is the solution to it not happening again “more control”?

This vicious cycle of more control, and less transparency is, I believe, a key factor in what appears to be a slow but steady decent down a path to a dystopia of our own creation.

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