

BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU

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George Orwell's novel '1984' was published in 1949; it has been translated into over 65 languages and has been noted as one of the most definitive novels of the twentieth century (McCrum, 2009). The book describes a totalitarian dystopian society set in 1984, where terror and surveillance is prominent. The futuristic setting of the novel is one where citizens are in fear of technology, as it is controlled by the government to monitor man's every move. The majority of individuals in the book are dehumanised, and all led by 'Big Brother', who is the leader of 'The Party'. The city of Oceania is full of corruption, deprivation and fear. Food and clothing is sparse, and the city is

bombed regularly. People are governed by the Thought Police, who have hidden cameras and microphones everywhere. Individuals can never turn their 'telescreens' off, and live in the fear of every move being monitored.

There are also posters of the mysterious Big Brother leader everywhere, with the tagline 'BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU'.



If the people of Oceania are found to have disobeyed The Party – or to have even thought about doing so – people are 'vaporised', whereupon they disappear and are erased from all databases and memory. Individuals are restricted in the things they do, and are not allowed to date, have sexual relations, or to have any close friends. Instead, the government channel people's emotional energy into their created programmes, such as 'Two Minute Hate', where they are shown propaganda against opposing ideas, which in turn leads citizens into believing in Big Brother. I found that several of the

aspects from this book related to current social theories, such as Lyon's 'surveillance society' and self-surveillance.

Although the society in the book is evidently worse than contemporary Britain today, there are certain elements that infiltrate our everyday lives. In Oceania people are constantly under surveillance, and this can be seen in our everyday society- whether we are aware, or not so. From cameras in bars, shops, streets, roads- they are everywhere. Every time we email, use a cashpoint or our smartphones.

As Lyon (2002: 1) notes, our everyday life is subject to "monitoring, checking and scrutinizing", with the average person in Britain being caught on camera 300 times a day (Independent, 2004). Likewise to in Orwell's novel, surveillance is never really escaped- whilst it may not be as openly as intrusive as a TV you can never turn off, Google and

Facebook record our data and search history (Ball, 2012) and can sell this information off to third parties (Ehrenberg, 2014).

The impact that surveillance has on our lives can be far more destructive than an advert for the latest iPad you sent to your mum for your Christmas list popping up on your Mac screen. Career Builder found that one fifth of employer's research potential employees on social networking sites, and 59% of these say that an online presence will influence a decision (Geddes, 2014). This is something that I have found myself, when working as a courier (glorified cleaner) in France. Soon after my arrival I found that I had already been placed into a friendship group due to what they had seen and perceived of me through Facebook before I'd arrived. Needless to say I did not

stick with who they had chosen for me, which brings to question the ever popular self-surveillance. Self-surveillance is not restricted to social media, but through DIY pregnancy, AIDS and menopause kits to name a few, and Marx (2004) notes that the line between the surveilled and surveillant merge.

Whilst the totalitarian fears of Orwellian control are related to state surveillance, Lyon (2002) argues that surveillance societies are not totalitarian, even though they have the technological capacity to be so. A state



surveillance is one where surveillance activities have long since spilled over the edges of government bureaucracies to "flood every conceivable social audit" (Lyon, 2002: 33). In our

current society surveillance, however, they pay attention to personal data, and desire to influence our everyday life, but are not surveillance states (yet). The impact of surveillance is not always negative, with technologies meaning that deaths, accidents and injuries are reducing due to CCTV, DNA and drug testing (McCahill, 2002).

The mysterious 'yet' is one I find interesting. When Orwell first published his novel, this totalitarian future he described must have seemed terrifying to many, probably because it was plausible, especially due to Nazi Germany in the recent world war. '1984' is a tale that we still hear caution about- but Orwell's dystopic vision has been exceeded, and a futuristic fear is one which may be even more alarming. It could not have been envisioned that we would

have the technology that we do. Even so, though Haggerty & Ericson (2007) argue that Orwell's vision of the 'proles' (proletariat) being under less scrutiny and observation is unrealistic- high profile people in modern society are under much higher amounts, for example celebrities.

Foucault uses the term 'panopticon' to define the progress and conversion of the Orwellian society as it moves from a discipline society to one of the management and monitoring of population "encapsulated in a territorial container controlled by the state" (Bigo, 2006: 46). Though we may not be in the society Orwell literally describes, we are still involved in power relations through systems of self-surveillance. Similarly to the world in 1984, people *are* careful of their every move, from how their tummy looks in their post kebab drunken photos to getting speeding tickets and so on. Are Bentham's Panopticon tower and Orwell's 'Big Brother' disparate? In the panopticon tower, prisoners were open to constant observation, though could never tell when they were, which is similar to Big Brother (Lyon, 2006). The effect of the subject visibility means that the prisoner ends up playing both roles- assuring the role of power- "he is the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault, 1977: 202).

If under the possibility of observation, we behave in the way in which we believe the 'power' would want us to. Our bodies would be docile- but it would be a show. We view ourselves from the perspective of the powerful. This is not how humans only react in a prison situation, but in fact in many. A prison is said to have similar operations running like a school, factories and hospitals (Bruno & Vaz, 2003). As the world becomes more and more globalised, with companies becoming bigger every day, is the Orwellian state a far cry away?

In businesses such as Amazon, they track employees at all times with a scanner machine. This lets the supervisors know the location of any worker at any given moment, which allows them to know their second-by-second rhythm and productivity (Lounes, 2013). I work as a promoter (standing in the cold trying to hand out soggy flyers- everyone hates flyerers), and I can see how the panopticon model reflects with me. In my job our boss tries to scare us by sending out 'people' to do random checks on us (I seem to be the unlucky one it happens to), to try and ensure we are doing our job. I live in fear of needing the toilet as even that can result in not getting paid if you haven't sent a text update! God forbid wanting to warm your hands up! This kind of surveillance environment is similar to the one in '1984'; it is uncomfortable to feel constantly watched and makes people behave in different ways.

Obviously this is not *literally* the same, as the worker in the amazon warehouse is not having to have a 'two minute hate' break- and handing out flyers for £6.50 an hour will ensure that I can afford the luxury of plenty of food and clothes. But the dystopian future that Orwell describes can be argued to share elements with contemporary Britain today (though not to the same extent); people are pushed with propaganda about things, we are constantly under surveillance- and if nothing else, this reflection has taught me I should aim to get a better job.

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Picture 1:

<http://englishbookgeorgia.com/blogebg/interesting-words-and-expressions-big-brother-is-watching-you/> (accessed 30/4/2015)

Picture 2:

<https://keithguvc.wordpress.com/2012/09/30/project-looking-observation-and-surveillance-2/> (accessed 30/4/2015)