

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT SOCIOLOGY & HUMANITIES



ISSN 2277 – 9809 (online)

ISSN 2348 - 9359 (Print)

An Internationally Indexed Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal

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www.isarasolutions.com

Published by iSaRa Solutions

SURVEILLANCE, TRUTH, AND POWER IN GEORGE ORWELL'S *NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR*

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Abstract

George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) is a foundational dystopian text that examines the mechanics of totalitarian power in the 20th and 21st centuries. Through the story of Winston Smith in the superstate of Oceania, Orwell illustrates how surveillance, language manipulation, and historical revisionism can be used to eliminate individual thought and autonomy. This paper argues that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* functions both as a critique of Stalinism and Nazism and as a broader philosophical warning about the relationship between truth, language, and power. By analyzing the Party's use of Newspeak, Doublethink, and the Ministry of Truth, this paper demonstrates how Orwell anticipated contemporary concerns about mass surveillance, misinformation, and ideological control.

Keywords: George Orwell, Dystopia, Totalitarianism, Newspeak, Surveillance, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Introduction

When *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published on June 8, 1949, Europe was still rebuilding from World War II and the Cold War was beginning to divide the world into ideological blocs. George Orwell, writing from the Isle of Jura while dying of tuberculosis, produced a novel that would outlast its immediate political context to become a permanent part of the global vocabulary. Terms like "Big Brother," "thoughtcrime," and "Orwellian" are now used to describe any form of invasive state power or distortion of truth.

The novel is set in Oceania, one of three superstates perpetually at war. The protagonist, Winston Smith, works at the Ministry of Truth, where his job is to rewrite historical records to match the Party's current political line. His quiet rebellion — keeping a diary, falling in love with Julia, seeking contact with the Brotherhood — brings him into conflict with the Inner Party and ultimately leads to his psychological destruction in the Ministry of Love.

This paper will argue that Nineteen Eighty-Four is less a prediction of the year 1984 than an analysis of how power operates when it seeks total control. The paper is divided into four parts: historical context, mechanisms of control, language and psychology, and contemporary relevance.

Historical and Biographical Context

Orwell's political experiences directly shaped the novel. He fought with Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War and witnessed how both Stalinists and Fascists manipulated news and betrayed allies. In *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), he wrote: "I saw, in fact, history being written not in terms of what happened but of what ought to have happened according to various Party lines" (Orwell 219).

Three major influences are visible:

1. Stalin's Soviet Union: The purges, the cult of personality, and the rewriting of photographs and encyclopedias. Trotsky's erasure from official photos is mirrored in the novel's "unpersons."
2. Nazi Germany: The mass rallies, the Two Minutes Hate, and the use of an external enemy to maintain internal unity.
3. Wartime Britain: Orwell worked for the BBC during WWII and saw how information was censored and managed. The Ministry of Truth is directly based on the BBC's Broadcasting House and the Ministry of Information.

Orwell stated in a 1949 letter that he was "not writing a book about the future" but about "the kind of world we could arrive at" if current tendencies continued (Orwell, *Collected Essays* 568).

Mechanisms of Totalitarian Control in Oceania

Oceania is governed by the Party, headed by the figurehead Big Brother. Society is stratified into the Inner Party, Outer Party, and the Proles. Power is maintained through a combination of technology, ideology, and psychological pressure.

1. Surveillance: The Telescreen and the Thought Police

The telescreen is the central technology of control. It broadcasts propaganda 24 hours a day and also functions as a camera and microphone. Winston notes: "There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment" (Orwell 4).

This creates what Foucault later called the "panopticon effect" — discipline through the possibility of observation (Foucault 201). Citizens internalize Party rules because they cannot know when they are being watched. The Thought Police extend this surveillance into the realm of thought itself. "Thoughtcrime" is the essential crime because it exists before any action.

2 Perpetual War and the Slogans

Oceania is in a perpetual war with either Eurasia or Eastasia. The war serves no material purpose. Its function is economic and psychological: it justifies rationing, directs hatred outward, and prevents social mobility.

The Party's three slogans — "WAR IS PEACE. FREEDOM IS SLAVERY. IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH" — are designed to be contradictory. They are not meant to be logically resolved. Instead, they train citizens to accept contradiction without question.

3. Control of the Past: The Ministry of Truth

Winston's job is to alter records in the Records Department. Old newspaper articles are replaced with new versions. Photographs are destroyed. The goal is stated explicitly: "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past" (Orwell 37).

This is more than censorship. It is the elimination of objective evidence. If the Party says that chocolate rations have increased when they have actually decreased, and all records are altered, then for the citizen the new claim is reality. This anticipates current debates about "fake news," deepfakes, and the digital alteration of archives.

Language and Psychology: Newspeak and Doublethink

1. Newspeak: The Destruction of Language

Newspeak is the official language of Oceania, designed to "narrow the range of thought" (Orwell 55). The 11th Edition of the Newspeak Dictionary is being compiled during the novel. Its principles are:

1. Reduction of vocabulary: "Bad" becomes "ungood."
2. Elimination of nuance: There is no word for "science" separate from "technology."
3. Political words: "Thoughtcrime," "joycamp," "facecrime" are all designed to make dissent linguistically impossible.

Orwell explored this in his essay "Politics and the English Language," where he argued that vague language enables political lies (Orwell 421). Newspeak is the endpoint of that process. If you cannot name rebellion, you cannot conceive of it.

2. Doublethink

Doublethink is defined as "the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them" (Orwell 215). Examples include believing that the Party is infallible while knowing that it changes its predictions, and forgetting that you have forgotten something.

Doublethink is required for Party members. It is different from lying because the person genuinely believes both things. Psychologically, it resembles cognitive dissonance, but it is taught and enforced. O'Brien is the master of Doublethink. Winston learns it under torture. The Party's goal is to make Doublethink unconscious and automatic.

Winston, Julia, and the Failure of Rebellion

Winston Smith is an anti-hero. He is 39, physically frail, and full of quiet rage. His rebellion is intellectual. He wants to understand the past and to preserve individual memory.

Julia's rebellion is different. For her, "rebellion meant a lovely gesture" (Orwell 142). She breaks rules for pleasure: sex, black market goods, and avoiding Party meetings. She does not care about ideology. Together, they represent two forms of resistance: political and personal.

Their relationship is the Party's primary target. In Room 101, O'Brien uses Winston's greatest fear — rats — to break him. The final demand is: "Do it to Julia!" (Orwell 295). By betraying the one person he loves, Winston's self is destroyed. The novel ends with him sitting in the Chestnut Tree Café, drinking gin and loving Big Brother.

This ending is crucial. The Party does not just want obedience. It wants the complete internalization of its reality.

Literary Style and Structure

Orwell uses a plain, journalistic prose style. There are no metaphors or lyrical passages. This reflects the Party's hatred of aesthetic language and makes the horror more direct.

Key symbols:

- The glass paperweight: Represents Winston's attempt to hold a piece of the past. Its shattering signals his defeat.
- Room 101: The room containing "the worst thing in the world" for each person. It represents individualized terror.
- The Appendix: Written in past tense about Newspeak, it suggests that the Party eventually fell. This creates narrative distance and a hint of hope.

The structure moves from external rebellion to internal defeat. Parts 1 and 2 show Winston's resistance. Part 3 shows its complete dismantling.

Themes

1. Objective Truth vs. Political Reality

The central philosophical conflict is over reality. O'Brien claims: "Reality is not external. Reality exists in the human mind, and nowhere else" (Orwell 259). Orwell is defending empiricism. If 2+2 can equal 5 by decree, then science, law, and morality collapse.

2. Power as an End

Unlike traditional utopias, the Party has no goal beyond power. O'Brien states: "Power is not a means; it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one

makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship" (Orwell 280). This is a direct rejection of Marxist ideas of history progressing toward communism.

3. The Destruction of Human Connection

The Party seeks to eliminate loyalty outside the Party. Children are encouraged to report parents. Sex is turned into a duty called "sexcrime." Winston and Julia's affair is dangerous because it creates a private space. Its destruction proves the Party's total reach.

Contemporary Relevance in 2026

Nineteen Eighty-Four is invoked constantly in debates about technology and politics.

1. Surveillance: CCTV, facial recognition, smartphone tracking, and smart home devices function as modern telescreens. The difference is that many are voluntarily purchased.
2. Misinformation: The Ministry of Truth parallels concerns about algorithm-driven feeds, AI-generated content, and state propaganda. The term "alternative facts" was widely compared to Doublethink.
3. Language: Political slogans, euphemisms like "enhanced interrogation," and the simplification of discourse online resemble Newspeak.
4. Corporate Power: While Orwell focused on the state, companies now collect and analyze behavioral data on a scale the Party could not imagine.

Scholars caution that no current state matches Oceania's total control. But the mechanisms Orwell described — surveillance, rewriting history, and controlling language — are present in fragmented forms.

Conclusion

Nineteen Eighty-Four remains powerful because it diagnoses how authoritarianism works at the level of thought. Orwell shows that the most effective tyranny is one that makes resistance unthinkable.

Winston's defeat is total, but the novel itself is an act of resistance. By describing Doublethink, Newspeak, and the manipulation of history, Orwell gives readers the vocabulary to resist them.

The final question the novel poses is not "Will this happen?" but "How much of this are we willing to accept?" In an age of data collection, information overload, and political polarization, that question is more urgent than ever.

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