

Is The Internet The Harbinger Of Orwell's Nightmares?

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Abstract

In his novel 1984, the famous novelist, George Orwell, penned the phrase 'Big Brother is watching you', a statement which has since entered the English language as a sarcastic slogan for the surveillance state. The idea of an all seeing, all knowing dictator was a terrifying idea to people living under the threat of the cold war - today we can draw worrying parallels between the methods of Big Brother and the potential uses of the internet.

Today's internet is filled with threats to privacy and freedom of expression. With demonstrable censorship occurring in more and more countries and social networking being linked to government surveillance, the fear of the internet's misuse is genuine. In an arena some fear is all too similar to the world of 1984, it is important to examine these risks, and therefore in this essay we will attempt to study the extent that *through monitoring and social networking, the internet is the harbinger of George Orwell's nightmare.*

1 Introduction

In his acclaimed novel, 1984, George Orwell imagines a world enslaved by fear, cursed with pervasive censorship and gripped by subservience to the deified *Big Brother*. Whilst Orwell envisioned this dystopian future as a warning for the dangers of totalitarianism during the cold war years, many of the themes within the book have been cited as examples of the consequences that can arise from the breakdown of civil liberties. Indeed Orwell's work was so influential that the word *Orwellian* has been coined to describe repressive regimes. In particular, Orwell's ideas about government surveillance, demonisation of a group to generate war hysteria and repression of dissent, have become uncomfortable reminders of today's political climate and the threat of terrorism.

Whilst Orwell wrote other novels, painting equally negative pictures of the dangers of communism and totalitarianism, 1984 represents the epitome of his work - the very darkest, bleakest picture of what could be. Whilst the fears of global communism did not come to fruition, today's world, of CCTV; the fear of terrorism; disenfranchised groups and communities torn apart by the cult of celebrity, is closer to Orwell's world than we might like to admit. The technology of today is vastly more complex than anything Orwell could have envisioned. Although he predicted televisions in every room, Orwell had no idea of the cultural changes that the digital age would bring. Despite this, his work is a yard stick by which we can measure the gradient of our societies decline, and the warnings he makes are equally valid. It is especially interesting, given today's networking obsession, to consider the warnings of Orwell against the backdrop of the internet.

As society relies more and more on the internet for communication, genuine fears have been expressed that these technologies will lead to the breakdown of privacy and freedom of expression. By examining some of these issues in detail, this essay will attempt to ask whether the internet is indeed the harbinger of Orwell's nightmares.

2 Censorship

The Party said that Oceania had never been in alliance with Eurasia. He, Winston Smith, knew that Oceania had been in alliance with Eurasia as short a time as four

years ago. But where did that knowledge exist? Only in his own consciousness, which in any case must soon be annihilated. [1]

One of the key themes in 1984 is the effects of censorship and the oppression of ideas contrary to governing policy. Whilst the internet has been hailed as an open forum- where ideas are free to be shared and expressed- censorship has begun to manifest.

Censorship is repression of information, and is contrary to the principles of democracy and progressive society. As a limitation on freedom of speech, it is considered an abuse of power in free societies. A quote, attributed to Voltaire [2], encapsulates the desire for free speech:

I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.

The most well known incident regarding censorship on the internet was Google's [3] agreement to filter their search results for the Chinese Government. China, still under communist rule, has a long history of censorship, however the agreement by an American company to remove content- for example the pictures of the Tianeman Square Massacre- marked a new step in the progression of censorship. Writers on the internet did not fail to notice the irony of a company whose motto is "don't be evil" submitting to pressure to suppress content.

But whilst the Chinese Google fiasco was widely publicised, a more insidious form of censorship is spreading across the online arena. In the United Kingdom, a program known as *Cleanfeed* is now required by law to be implemented by all ISP's. Ostensibly a protection against child abuse websites and paedophilia, Cleanfeed works by filtering traffic and blocking access to sites on a block list. Unlike many other web censorship tools, however, Cleanfeed does not notify the user when a blocked site is requested. Instead the site is simply 'not found'. Herein lies the problem: since the blocklist is not public, the censorship is not transparent. More worryingly, there are no safeguards to stop officials adding other sites which may be unrelated to those agreed as damaging or illegal. As a paper by a law professor at the University Of Southampton notes:

If cleanfeed-style technology is imposed on all UK ISP's - by law or voluntarily - it could be the most perfectly invisible censorship mechanism ever invented.[4]

BBC reporter Bill Thompson also predicts that this censorship will lead to a slippery slope:

what is to stop BT [the ISP pioneering Cleanfeed] silently adding other categories to it's blocked list? Perhaps race hate sites, or sites that tell people how to hack the cleanfeed service itself?[5]

Whilst a case could be easily made for blocking paedophilic content, it is a relatively small step to add racism, and from there sites discriminating against minorities, and from there sites with unpopular viewpoints.

Whilst the dangers of internet predators are real and efforts must be made to combat them, censorship by methods such as Cleanfeed cannot be the answer. The opaque nature of this system means that safeguards to prevent officials abusing the system to block arbitrary sites are not possible. As the Roman poet Juvenal wrote: 'Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?' - who watches the watchmen?[6] The dangers of abuse of such a censorship tool by unknown parties far outweigh the benefit it provides.

3 Rewriting History

If the Party could thrust its hand into the past and say this or that even, *it never happened* - that, surely, was more terrifying than mere torture and death. [1]

Winston Smith, 1984's protagonist, works in the Fiction department of the Ministry of Truth. His job is the constant rewriting of history to reflect favorably upon the Party. As Smith ponders the meaning of an existence where everything is fiction, fabricated to justify government decisions

and to manipulate public opinion, Orwell shows the importance of collective memory and history in the development of a country's policy.

Wikipedia[7], an online social encyclopedia, has revolutionised the way knowledge is shared in the internet age. Despite the fact that anyone can edit any of its multitude of pages, studies have shown that it is of comparable accuracy to the Encyclopædia Britannica[8]. A major problem, however, is that whilst much of the information in the encyclopedia is accurate, fraudulent edits are commonplace, resulting in confusion over the accuracy of the data. Indeed, Wikipedia's unreliability is the reason why many institutions reject citations from the encyclopedia.

Despite these concerns, Wikipedia is used by millions of people. Its open editing model means that it is a fascinating insight into the workings of the social consciousness. No wonder then that the same fraudulent behaviour which goes on quietly in society happens also on Wikipedia.

In April 2007, a graduate student at Caltech released a tool called *Wikiscanner* that allowed anonymous edits to Wikipedia to be traced by IP address. A simple idea, the tool attracted much publicity when it was discovered that many edits to the encyclopedia came from inside corporate offices and even the government. Edits to the encyclopedia ranged from those preserving corporate image - the oil company Exxon removed information about their infamous oil spill disaster - to more disturbing modifications- for example the CIA amending estimates of the casualties of the war in Iraq .

Whilst the aims of Wikipedia, to make knowledge freely available, are noble, a topic that will be discussed later, the democratisation of knowledge allows vandalism like this to erode history. The American comedian Stephen Colbert satirised this process in his mock-news show by creating the word *truthiness* to describe the overuse of emotion, rather than fact, in discourse. As he said:

I will speak to you in plain, simple English. And that brings us to tonight's word: 'truthiness.' Now I'm sure some of the 'word police,' the 'wordinistas' over at Webster's are gonna say, 'hey, that's not a word'. Well, anyone who knows me knows I'm no fan of dictionaries or reference books.

I don't trust books. They're all fact, no heart. And that's exactly what's pulling our country apart today. 'Cause face it, folks; we are a divided nation. Not between Democrats and Republicans, or conservatives and liberals, or tops and bottoms. No, we are divided between those who think with their head, and those who know with their heart.

... And what about Iraq? If you think about it, maybe there are a few missing pieces to the rationale for war. But doesn't taking Saddam out feel like the right thing? [13]

He later extended his new philosophy to include the reality of wikipedia - or as he called it wikiality:

You see, any user can change any entry, and if enough other users agree with them, it becomes true. ... If only the entire body of human knowledge worked this way. And it can, thanks to tonight's word: Wikiality. Now, folks, I'm no fan of reality, and I'm no fan of encyclopedias. I've said it before. Who is Britannica to tell me that George Washington had slaves? If I want to say he didn't, that's my right. And now, thanks to Wikipedia, it's also a fact. We should apply these principles to all information. All we need to do is convince a majority of people that some factoid is true. ... What we're doing is bringing democracy to knowledge.[13]

Orwell, the creator of the language Newspeak in *1984* - a language that was designed to limit expression, would surely have been a fan of Colbert's new words.

Although Colbert jokes about the degradation of reality, this is a worrying trend. By letting the people freely modify their own knowledge, the biases and trends that affect public opinion will pollute the social knowledge. As Orwell notes in *1984*, 'Sanity is not statistical'[1]. By making knowledge *so* accessible, Wikipedia has ignored systems, such as peer review, that have been developed over many years to combat such inaccuracies. Whilst Wikipedia has added certain safeguards, such as requiring citations, to try and limit these failures, the system is still flawed. Until

Wikipedia improves its safeguards against *truthiness* it must be treated with extreme vigilance, and tools such as Wikiscanner must be publicised to minimise the defrauding of our history.

4 Privacy

With the development of television, and the technical advances which made it possible to receive and transmit simultaneously on the same instrument, private life came to an end. Every citizen, or at least every citizen important enough to be worth watching, could be kept for twenty four hours a day under the eyes of the police and in the sound of official propoganda, with all other channels of communication closed.[1]

In the 1948 *Univeral Declaration of Human Rights* [14], the right to privacy is set out:

No one should be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondance, nor to attacks on his honour or reputation. Everyone has the right to protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

Despite this, privacy has been under constant attack ever since. While an estimated 300 CCTV cameras watch the movements of the average British citizen daily [15], it is computers and the internet that pose the greatest threat in today's society.

In 1984, one of the chief methods of controlling the population was the constant surveillance of every citizen - the fear that they were being watched enslaved the population into the servitude of Big Brother. As the famous security expert Bruce Schneir paraphrases Cardinal Richelieu [16]:

Watch someone long enough, and you'll find something to arrest - or just blackmail - them with.

One of the most important websites today is the social networking tool Facebook[17]. With over 60 million users sharing pictures, messages and interests on the site it is an advertisers dream. The amount of personal data that the site contains is, however, worrying. When Facebook was set up in 2004, one of the first investments in the company was from venture capital firm Accel Partners, whose manager James Breyer previously served on the board of a company specialising in data mining, alongside the CEO of a venture capital company set up by the CIA. With such close ties to a government intelligence agency, it is no wonder that many people are so suspicious of Facebook; but the dangers of privacy violations may lie elsewhere.

It is now known that before hiring new employees, many companies do a background check on their internet presence which can often include an examination of their Facebook profile. Whilst many companies defend a practise that has been criticised as intrusive by claiming the information is public, allegations have been made that companies have contacted Facebook asking for restricted information.[20]

Although the information on the internet *is* considered public, many people do not realise the implications of leaving sensitive data in this arena. The use of this information by employers is a definite sign that such sites are being watched. It is probable that intelligence agencies use information from such social networking tools in profiling and it cannot be long before advertisers start scraping this data for their own uses.

Another area where Facebook has come under fire is for their controversial advertising tool Beacon. The tool publishes information about a users actions on a number of different sites back to a facebook profile. While most of the criticism of the system revolves around the fact that people do not want their actions broadcast to their friends, the very fact that this data is being correlated to an actual person is worrying. The relatively small number of contextual advert companies means that a persons internet history is known almost entirely by a few companies - Google's recent purchase of Doubleclick means that they can track IP addresses across a huge area of the internet. The only difference between this and Facebook is that Facebook is correlating data to names.

This practise is continued and extended in a proposed plan by BT, The Carphone Warehouse and Virgin. In their platform, *The Open Internet Exchange*, they hope to track the history of users at the ISP level and sell the data to advertisers. Although they claim that the data will be anonymised, web histories often leave a fingerprint that can identify a user and the potential for abuse is huge. Should the project be initiated, private internet access will be virtually impossible in the UK.

With internet usage such an integral part of 21st century life, these trends are very worrying. To protect users privacy on the internet, stringent legislation governing companies ability to monitor citizens must be brought in. The data protection act must be updated to mitigate intrusive surveillance. These changes must happen quickly, or the privacies we enjoy today may disappear.

5 The Internet Against Orwellianism

‘Meanwhile I shall send you a copy of *the book*’ - even O’Brien, Winston noticed, seemed to pronounce the words as though they were in italics - ‘Goldstein’s book, you understand, as soon as possible. It may be some days before I can get hold of one. There are not many in existence, as you can imagine. The Thought Police hunt them down and destroy them almost as fast as we can produce them. It makes very little difference. The book is indestructible. If the last copy was gone, we could reproduce it almost word for word.’ [1]

In 1984, the truth about the state of the world is contained in *the book*, a treatise clandestinely published by the enemies of the state. Detailing the reality of the system, the book represents the survival of truth even in the most repressive of societies. In today’s society the internet can play much the same role.

The so called *Web 2.0* revolution has changed the way the internet operates. By facilitating the publication of content by people with little technical expertise, sites such as Youtube, Wordpress, Flickr and Wikipedia have lowered the barrier to participation the internet and allowed people, who previously could only spectate, to play an active part in the creation of online content. This explosion in the number of voices on the internet has meant that an entirely new news source has emerged.

As the BBC reports:

The time when people accepted without question a newspaper’s or broadcaster’s view of the world is on the way out. It is being replaced by a universe in which readers can compare and contrast information, where trust has to be earned. [23]

The number of publishers on the internet, and the corresponding number of points of view, mean that changes to the system are noticed and discussed in an open forum. Sites like Wikipedia aim to make the world’s knowledge available to everyone and thus the users of the internet have access to a huge vault of knowledge.

The speed by which stories propagate and are mirrored across the internet means that should a story be leaked from a source, by the time the original site is shut down, the story is likely to be spread across the web and therefore difficult to contain.

An example of this is the AACS encryption key fiasco where the MPAA¹ tried to censor one of the 128 bit keys for Blu-Ray and HD DVD encryption. After receiving a cease and desist letter from the MPAA, the forum containing the key leveraged the power of social networking sites such as Digg.com[24] to spread the number across the web until it was published on over 400 000 websites. Realising that they had little chance of stopping the spread, the MPAA stopped their protest.

Stories like this show how the internet empowers small web publishers to stand up to large corporations by acting en masse. This fortitude is encouraging and means that the internet has the power to help resist the regulations of oppressive corporations or regimes.

¹MPAA: Motion Picture Association of America.

6 Conclusion

Men are only as good as their technical development allows them to be.[25]

Is the internet the harbinger of Orwellian times? From the examples that have been discussed we can see that there is a clear shift towards a more oppressive internet. The UK faces much danger at the ISP level with both *Cleanfeed* and the *Open Internet Initiative* as dangerous steps towards a loss of freedom of speech. This loss of liberties is surely a worrying trend and may indicate worse times are ahead. In this sense the issues facing the internet are indeed a warning sign of what may be to come.

The internet is indubitably a tool that can be abused by corrupt regimes. China's internet censorship is a demonstration to the West of the way such power can be abused - Google's submission to the Chinese government can only add weight to the dangers the internet faces. But the technologies are not to blame for this abuse. This evil, as always, comes from corrupt men. Although regimes may try to use the internet as a pawn in their machinations, the web itself is not to blame. Indeed the very nature of the internet may help to avoid such misuse.

The vast number of people contributing online means that the internet has become a global community. By working together, for example in the AACS key fiasco, the citizens of the internet have realised that they can wield great power. In a sense, the web is the perfect democracy, where everyone has a voice and prejudice must be purely intellectual. This online *society* means that, whilst care must be taken by its people to avoid their social consciousness eroding the facts- as was faced by Wikipedia, people have a voice. And where there are so many voices reporting the state of the world, it is hard to dupe or silence them all.

Yes, the issues here are only the tip of an iceberg- the number of stories surrounding the loss of freedoms on the internet are far too numerous to cover in a single essay. The internet is facing a defining moment. The way these issues are dealt with will shape the way that future generations use the internet. In this sense, the internet is less of a warning sign and more of a new challenge that society will face; as we face this challenge the warnings of Orwell and 1984 should be remembered.

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