

# State-Surveillance Nexus in George Orwell's 1984: A Revisionist Reading

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## Abstract

*A totalitarian regime represents a form of governance where absolute authoritarian control permeates every aspect of public and private life, fostering grave consequences such as the ruthless suppression of individual liberties, pervasive censorship, economic stagnation, and profound societal trauma. The far-reaching implications of such regimes have ignited the imaginations of many literary figures, most notably George Orwell, whose incisive critique of societal injustice and political deception is masterfully captured in 1984. In this seminal work, Orwell constructs a dystopian world ruled by omnipotent rulers who surveil and dictate every facet of individual existence. The chilling portrayal of the totalitarian regime is inextricably linked to the concept of the Panopticon, a theoretical model first conceived by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham. However, Michel Foucault profoundly expanded the Panopticon's significance, introducing the theory of Panopticism—a framework illustrating a system of social governance marked by rigorous regulation and surveillance, akin to the mechanisms of a prison. In the contemporary world, AI surveillance and deep learning technologies manifest a modern incarnation of this panoptic apparatus, underscoring the enduring relevance of Bentham's and Foucault's ideas. The despotic machinations of Orwell's tyrannical regime find eerie parallels in the ubiquitous surveillance apparatus of contemporary times, epitomised by the relentless march of AI-driven technologies. This paper explores Orwell's narrative, Bentham's architectural vision, and Foucault's theoretical insights that intricately weave together panoramic views on power, control, and resistance that transcend both historical and contemporary contexts.*

**Keywords:** Panopticon, Totalitarian Regime, Economic Stagnation, Dystopian World and Artificial Intelligence.

The waning years of the nineteenth century and the formative decades of the twentieth century witnessed the ascendancy and eventual decline of autocratic leaders such as Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini and Joseph Stalin. To some, they are the benignant leaders who rescued their country from demolition, at the same time, on the contrary, they may also be considered as the stony autocratic leaders who were responsible for some of the most heinous events in history. Their government employed idealistic propaganda to instill a deceptive perception of reality among the public. Whether the issue was minor or major, the propaganda was designed to reinforce the belief that the ruling power was absolute. These autocratic leaders had made that propaganda possible through their pleasing speeches. They governed people by masking the vein of reality.

Writers like Elizabeth Bowen, Barbara Pym, Anthony Powell, and George Orwell were some of the prominent writers who used the themes of power, authority, identity, thirst for civilization, language, and technology and they too have many works of the great coup. Most conspicuous among these writers was George Orwell, who used his literary power to make social commentary and his indirect and concise style made his work popular even today. Eric Arthur Blair, renowned across the literary world by his iconic pen name

George Orwell, was a visionary British novelist, masterful essayist and critic. Orwell's style is undeviating and somewhat journalistic. He never employs allusion or utilizes extended metaphors. The two most common themes found in his books are based on injustice and political dishonesty. Orwell's works are intensely filled with the notions of liberty, equality, censorship and the control of power. His major novels are *Animal Farm* (1945), *1984* (1949), *Burmese Days* (1934), *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935), *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying* (1936) and *Coming Up for Air* (1939). His non-fiction works include *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) and *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). Orwell's *1984* and the theory of panopticon both explore the possibility of surveillance.

Jeremy Bentham, one of the most famous English philosophers and social theorists in the eighteenth century, is most famous for his innovative conceptualization of the Panopticon. This is not merely an architectural design, for it is a potent metaphor for surveillance, control, and the ubiquity of the authority. It has become, overtime, a durable icon of modern discipline. The word 'Panopticon' is derived from a Greek word that means 'all-seeing'-panoptes. The Panopticon was a new discipline paradigm that aimed to instill a constant feeling of being watched by the prisoners, thereby inducing them to internalize the surveillance of the authority. In the absence of definitive knowledge of the inspection timing, prisoners were under the constant risk of being observed. This ingenious design, besides facilitating compliance and psychological self-policing, reduced the necessity for a large observation corps, exerting control through the force instead of depending on immediate physical surveillance. In other words, this central observation can be called the 'Panopticon Gaze', this all-seeing gaze embodies absolute transparency, allowing the rulers to peer into every corner of society, their watchful eyes shaping the actions of every individual. A testament to Bentham's vision, it renders power as both omnipresent and unknowable.

While Bentham is widely regarded as the architect of the Panopticon, the origin of the Panopticon extends beyond. The genesis of the panopticon bears testament to the visionary endeavours of Samuel Bentham. While working on an estate in Krichev, Russia, Samuel faced the challenge of managing the workforce, to solve this he positioned himself at the centre of his factory and arranged his workstation in a circular layout around his central desk, which allowed him to monitor all the workers simultaneously. When Bentham saw the effectiveness of this design, he realised that it could be applied beyond factories, extending to prisons, schools, and hospitals.

The panopticon serves as a model for external forms of surveillance while the French philosopher Michel Foucault has introduced the term Panopticism to indicate some forms of surveillance that occur within. In other words, Foucault's panopticism blurs the line between the observer and the observed. The all-seeing eye now has an internalised form that seeps into individuals as opposed to being removed from them. It is a constraining force in alluding to a space in which a captive may operate. Therefore, in prisons, action can be defined not through physical boundaries but through internalized surveillance determining what to do or not to do. Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, explores the profound implications of panopticism. The Panopticon served as an illustration of how discipline can be employed in carceral institutions, where every moment is meticulously observed and regulated. Through relentless, monotonous labor, prisoners are conditioned into submission by the drudgery of repetitive works. Similarly, observation creates a human mind accessible to the authority to control.

Technologies like Deep Learning Cameras and internet surveillance embody parts of observation that resonate well with Foucault's view of the interconnectivity between power and knowledge. He realized that knowledge is always associated with power, or, as seen more frequently, power/knowledge, with the point that power can be exercised in order to produce knowledge. Foucault's search into the machinery that promotes submission to power resonates with the contemporary panoptical monitoring systems of Western society. These pervasive mechanisms, including deceptive surveillance devices, such as faux/dummy cameras, and AI cameras instill a sense of constant scrutiny. Photoradar exemplifies this modern Panopticon, where transgressions result in automated, impersonal penalties like receiving a traffic ticket via mail. Unlike the confrontation with police, where persuasion or negotiation may alter the outcome of such interactions, autonomous surveillance divorces consequences from human interaction, epitomizing the detached and omnipresent gaze of authority.

*1984* focuses on how the totalitarian regime incessantly observes every action of the individual. The story unfolds in London, where the city is dilapidated. The novel is set in Oceania which has been portrayed as a depressing place. Some kinds of global conflicts are taking place and no one is aware of it and doesn't know why it happened. The massive pyramid-shaped government building rises above the landscape watching each and everything that the people do. Every street corner and every lamp post has pictures of Big Brother's face, said to be the leader of the government and the posters screamed, "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU"(Orwell 3). There are Telescreens, cameras, and microphones everywhere. The protagonist, Winston Smith, is in the clumps of a utopian future. He leads an isolated life, and unfortunately, Winston meets Julia and falls in love. O'Brien, a secret member of the 'Thought Police', whom Winston trusted a lot and at once Winston and Julia were betrayed by O'Brien and got arrested, the 'Thought Police' sent them to the 'Ministry of Love' for torture. Winston was badly tortured by the 'Thought Police' and after betraying Julia Police released them. Winston no longer loves Julia instead towards the end of the novel he begins to love BIG BROTHER. The unquestionable dogmas established by Big Brother reflect how brutal the tyrannical authority is. The 'two-minute hate', 'Room 101', 'Thought Police', 'Ministry of Love', 'Ministry of Purpose', and so on transform the people to a nonsensical stage. Therefore, in the dystopian landscape of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Big Brother assumes the shape of the very essence of hegemonic control whereby Foucault's idea of power as pervasive and choking at every level of social life is fully embodied.

Every society has what Foucault calls a regime of truth. These regimes determine which discourses are allowed and which are not. One of the restrictions on truth is who gets to own and produce it. In our society, Foucault argues, it is mostly produced and determined by universities, schools, armies' media and writers. (Brown 30)

Orwell portrays a world of constant surveillance, betrayal, and terror under the heel of Big Brother, where people disappear without anyone noticing. "The more the Party is powerful, the less it will be tolerant: the weaker the opposition, the tighter the despotism" (Orwell 339). Dogma of Ingsoc systematically eliminates the pertinence of past facts and consigns them to the status of mere entries in written records, creating a group memory that has no living recollection. The telescreens are a ubiquitous watchdog ruthlessly restricting the free domain of thought. "The past is whatever the records and the memories agree upon. And since the Party is in full control of all records and equally full control of the minds of its members, it follows that the past is whatever the Party chooses to make it" (270). The government's omnipresent slogan, "War Is Peace; Freedom Is Slavery; Ignorance is Strength"(6) resonates deeply within the confines of this authoritarian regime.

Indeed, the path of Artificial Intelligence creeps ever closer to the emulation of human intellect just like the prophesied entity that resembles the idea of George Orwell's book, *1984*. In this new paradigm, AI Cameras or Deep Learning Cameras assume the role just like the all-knowing Big Brother, in which minute-by-minute details of every action and expression of the individual are closely watched and monitored. Orwell's magnum opus, *1984*, heralds in the poignant testimony of that weird congruence between the dystopian world and the rising dominion of Artificial Intelligence. It peels back layers of our AI-driven world.

### **Resurrecting Big Brother: The Ascendancy of AI Surveillance**

Orwell's depiction of Big Brother as the ultimate symbol of surveillance and control is here alarmingly parallel to our times. Increased development of facial recognition, predictive analytics, and data mining reveals just how in-depth it is possible for these systems to penetrate our private lives, raising enormous concerns regarding the invasion of personal privacy that is galloping rapidly today. Here are a few instances that align with the concept of AI-driven surveillance. There is an instance that reveals the omnipresent telescreen, intended not only for supervising people but also for propaganda broadcasting.

The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously. Any sound that Winston made, above the level of a very low whisper, would be picked up by it; moreover, so long as he remained within the field of vision which the metal plaque commanded, he could be seen as well as heard. (5)

The notion of surveillance here is somehow similar to the way some contemporary AI surveillance technology uses facial recognition and motion-detecting cameras to identify and follow individuals who are not even conscious of being filmed. Just as Winston knows that he is under constant surveillance, just so the people of today are increasingly surveilled in their public and private lives by AI cameras and data miners that collect enormous amounts of data about the persons' lives.

Today, predictive analytics and data-mining techniques can even predict action before it happens, playing out a role similar to that of the 'Thought Police' in monitoring and controlling people's thoughts and actions. "There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork" (Orwell 6). Similarly, "always the eyes watching you and the voice enveloping you. Asleep or awake, working or eating, indoors or out of doors, in the bath or in bed – no escape. Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimetres inside your skull" (34).

Here the omnipresence of Big Brother creates a reality where privacy is practically non-existent. That sounds pretty familiar really; nowadays this world of everyday life is epitomized in AI technologies integrated into nearly every aspect of one's life—from social media platforms that analyze your likes and messages to smart home devices that record conversations.

The haunting picture of unending oppression reminds one of the functions of AI surveillance in control over society. AI technologies, especially within authoritarian regimes, become tools for silencing dissenting voices and shaping opinion to enforce compliance. "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever" (337). Forever under observation creates a feeling of helplessness that Orwell tried to convey in his vision of a future in which oppressive systems would not spare even a single thought, be it a wisp of an idea or an action, for that matter. The most recent form of AI is capable of processing vast volumes of personal data through complex categories, thereby changing the way people think and act. "Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it"(68). With the AI tracking and predicting behavior, one would almost ask if our thought and action is subtly being influenced or not.

## **Shaping Perceptions: Newspeak, Fake News, and the Power of AI**

Newspeak proved to be a sophisticated manipulation of language in order to control mass opinion. The algorithms of now, designed by AI, curate our online presence, making it vulnerable to the spreading of fake news and tailored information. Here are a few instances that align with this concept.

The Party wants people to believe in contradictions and, through constant repetition, “War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength.”(34). Likewise, the narratives of today’s AI algorithms are exactly those whose lack of coherence leaves it highly confused for any member of the public which then becomes nearly impossible to discern as fact or fiction. Similarly, the manipulation of information allows the Party to reshape reality by constantly altering historical records. “Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past”(313). Today it can be employed for spreading news reported to be fake, even rewriting historical accounts with the motive of changing how people understand the past.

The Party, again, manipulates the truth to keep the position it needs in power, not for the people; most persons have the purpose in the artificial intelligence age to control public opinion for power, profit, or influence, this is clearly depicted in the novel, “The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake.”(332). The darkest elements of the novel by Orwell include the manipulation of facts to the point where obvious falsehoods are accepted as truth. “In the end, the Party would announce that two and two made five, and you would have to believe it”(102). Today, misinformation spread through AI algorithms can make people believe in falsities. Similarly, there is a context, “The heresy of heresies was common sense” (103), that’s, Common sense—representing the ability to think independently and recognise truth—is a threat to total control in Orwell’s world. In the modern era, fake news and misinformation spread by AI can undermine common sense and critical thinking.

## **Echo Chambers Unveiled: The Doublethink Dilemma of Social Media**

Orwell also coined the word doublethink, which means the belief in two contradictory things simultaneously. In our world driven by social media, it is easy to see how Orwell’s notion of doublethink is very relevant. However, while examining the consequences of filter bubbles and echo chambers, be ready to face some disturbing realities regarding how our minds are influenced and the decline in analytical thinking skills. The notion of doublethink so perfectly captures a social media echo chamber experience.

DOUBLETHINK means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them. The Party intellectual knows in which direction his memories must be altered; he therefore knows that he is playing tricks with reality; but by the exercise of DOUBLETHINK he also satisfies himself that reality is not violated. (270)

Users come across many narratives, many of which are opposite, yet due to algorithmic reinforcement and groupthink, they accept those without question. Instead, people believe they are informed when, in fact, they only know what the filtered content reveals to them—that is, the filtered information.

How easily truth is manipulated and controlled by those in power, there is a remark about this in the novel, “And if all others accepted the lie which the Party imposed—if all records told the same tale—then the lie passed into history and became truth” (44). Similar to the role of algorithms on social media, when any particular narratives keep being repeated in echo chambers, even if they are lies, they have a tendency to be subscribed to more as true. People within these bubbles never question the information they get, and falsehoods become accepted as part of life, gradually grinding out critical thinking. People are convinced to reject true evidence and embrace myths that

better fit into the communities they have joined in the halls and this manipulation is quite clearly depicted in the novel “The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command”(103). Truth claims are often degraded due to information control by social media entities.

The paradox here is that while social media allows a person to stay within a space where they can acknowledge and be inundated with different realities, they are also programmed to believe in and accept only those narratives that promote their ideological echo chambers. While Orwell’s characters would appear to believe in opposing truths, people on social media seem to believe both misinformation and disbelieve contrary facts, this is clearly portrayed in the novel, that’s, “To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which canceled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them...”(44). Lastly, Social media echo chambers create a kind of intellectual orthodoxy, because they always set aside views within a comfort zone of like-minded thinking, thus far away from critically thinking it. This like-minded thinking process is depicted in the novel, that is, “Orthodoxy means not thinking—not needing to think. Orthodoxy is unconsciousness”(68).

### **Digital Age Resistance: Safeguarding Freedom and Privacy**

The face of heavy surveillance, data analysis, and manipulative control of our lives by AI systems, brought us step by step closer to the dark world that George Orwell had envisioned for us in *1984*. “Big Brother is watching you” (363). This iconic phrase sums up the everyday observation of citizens in this Orwellian dystopian realm, much like the current surveillance that is possible through modern means, like cameras, smartphones, and internet data. To this day, this reminds us how personal privacy erodes with the lack of proper safeguarding by tech companies or governments while checking on our digital interactions “The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became the truth”(95), today AI practices mask the root of reality.

In the digital world, fear of surveillance or punishment can change how people behave in this virtual space. “We do not merely destroy our enemies; we change them” (319). It’s clear from the novel that the authoritarian power of a party controls every aspect of human life. The cycle of ignorance and control, that is, in the absence of awareness or digital literacy in modern terms, people cannot fight oppression. This instance is depicted in the novel, “Until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled, they cannot become conscious”(90). The moment that condition is met, they can demand changes in the way technology is being used or regulated.

As we conclude it becomes evident that it’s easy to see Orwell’s *1984* serves as a stark awakening into the AI-driven world in which we live. The overwhelming similarities are impossible to ignore and facts about surveillance, manipulation, and gradual loss of individual privacy, once fantastical, now resonate familiar to our world. In the labyrinth of existence, where shadows of authoritarianism loom large, it is the steadfast alignment with one’s intrinsic identity and the steadfast cultivation of personal knowledge that stand as the sole bulwarks against the spectre of *1984*’s terror. Amidst the tumult of societal upheaval and the encroaching tendrils of thought control, individuals find solace and resilience in the sanctuary of their authenticity. By navigating the complexities of existence with unwavering commitment to selfhood and enlightenment, they forge a path untainted by the Orwellian machinations of manipulation and oppression. In this pursuit, the indomitable spirit of self-discovery becomes a beacon of hope, illuminating the way forward toward liberation from the stifling grip of totalitarian tyranny.

In recognizing these warnings, we have to come together to protect the fragile balance between technological advances and the protected rights of human beings. It is pressing on ourselves that,

in embracing innovation, we should watch out for individual freedoms such that our future will not be controlled but guided by the light of transparency, accountability, and humanity.

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