



# Surveillance and Control in George Orwell's "1984": A Critical Insight

Mrs Rashmi S Patil

Assistant Professor, BLDE Association's A.S.Patil College of Commerce (Autonomous) Vijayapur Karnataka, India

Email: [rashmispatilh@gmail.com](mailto:rashmispatilh@gmail.com)

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**Abstract**— This article explores the pervasive themes of surveillance and control in George Orwell's dystopian masterpiece, "1984". Written in the aftermath of World War II, Orwell's novel is a dire warning against the dangers of totalitarian regimes. Through an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms employed by the Party, such as telescreens, the Thought Police, and the linguistic manipulation of Newspeak, this study reveals how Orwell portrays a society stripped of privacy, individuality, and truth. The psychological impacts of these control mechanisms on the populace are examined, illustrating the profound effects of constant surveillance and propaganda on human behavior and thought. Furthermore, the article connects Orwell's insights to contemporary issues, highlighting the parallels between the fictional world of Oceania and current societal trends in mass surveillance, data privacy, and information manipulation. By drawing on examples from modern technology and political practices, the relevance of Orwell's warnings in today's world is underscored. Through this comprehensive examination, the article seeks to deepen the understanding of Orwell's critique of totalitarianism and its implications for preserving democratic principles and individual freedoms in the face of increasing technological and political control.



**Keywords**— Surveillance, Totalitarianism, Control, Orwell, 1984, Dystopia

## INTRODUCTION

George Orwell's "1984", published in 1949, stands as one of the most profound and unsettling works of dystopian fiction. Orwell presents a world where totalitarianism reigns supreme, individual freedoms are obliterated, and truth is manipulated. Central to the novel is the theme of surveillance and the pervasive control it enables. This article examines how Orwell portrays the mechanisms of surveillance and control, their psychological impacts, and the novel's enduring relevance.

### Historical Context and Orwell's Motivations

To fully understand the significance of "1984", it is essential to consider the historical context in which Orwell wrote. The novel was penned in the aftermath of World War II, a period marked by totalitarian regimes such as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union under Stalin. Orwell's experiences during the Spanish Civil War, where he

witnessed firsthand the oppressive tactics of fascist and communist forces, deeply influenced his perception of political power and control.

Orwell's motivations for writing "1984" were driven by his fear of the future and his experiences with propaganda and political manipulation. His earlier works, such as \*Animal Farm\*, reflect similar concerns about totalitarianism and the betrayal of revolutionary ideals. In "1984", Orwell extrapolates these concerns into a dystopian future where the state exerts total control over every aspect of human life.

### The Dystopian Setting

Orwell's "1984" is set in Oceania, one of three superstates constantly at war. The Party, led by the enigmatic Big Brother, controls everything in Oceania, from history and language to thoughts and emotions. The setting is bleak, characterized by poverty, dilapidation, and

omnipresent surveillance. Orwell's vivid descriptions of the setting, such as the "rotting nineteenth-century houses" and the "vistas of rotting nineteenth-century houses" (Orwell, "1984", p. 5), create an atmosphere of decay and oppression.

### **Mechanisms of Control**

In "1984", the Party employs several mechanisms to maintain its grip on power, with surveillance being the most prominent. The omnipresent telescreens symbolize the Party's ability to monitor every aspect of a citizen's life. Orwell writes, "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" (Orwell, "1984", p. 3). These devices not only transmit propaganda but also watch and listen to individuals, ensuring that any hint of dissent can be immediately crushed. The slogan "Big Brother is watching you" encapsulates the omnipresent surveillance state.

### **The Role of Telescreens**

Telescreens serve as the primary tool for surveillance in "1984". They are installed in every home and public place, constantly transmitting Party propaganda and monitoring citizens' behavior. The psychological impact of telescreens is profound, creating an environment where privacy is nonexistent. As Winston Smith, the protagonist, reflects, "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. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time" (Orwell, "1984", p. 6). This uncertainty ensures that citizens conform to Party expectations out of fear of being observed.

The telescreens also serve as a tool for indoctrination. The constant stream of propaganda reinforces the Party's ideology and keeps citizens in a state of perpetual fear and obedience. Orwell's portrayal of the Two Minutes Hate, a daily ritual where citizens express their hatred for the Party's enemies, exemplifies how telescreens are used to manipulate emotions and maintain social cohesion: "The horrible thing about the Two Minutes Hate was not that one was obliged to act a part, but that it was impossible to avoid joining in" (Orwell, "1984", p. 14).

### **The Thought Police and Psychological Manipulation**

Another significant aspect of the Party's control is the Thought Police, who employ psychological manipulation to root out and punish thoughtcrime—any thinking that

opposes the Party. Orwell describes the Thought Police as a shadowy, omnipresent force: "It was terribly dangerous to let your thoughts wander when you were in any public place or within range of a telescreen. The smallest thing could give you away. A nervous tic, an unconscious look of anxiety, a habit of muttering to yourself—anything that carried with it the suggestion of abnormality, of having something to hide" (Orwell, "1984", p. 62). The fear of being caught by the Thought Police ensures a high level of self-censorship among the populace, further consolidating the Party's control.

The Thought Police use a variety of techniques to enforce conformity, including surveillance, informants, and torture. Orwell illustrates the effectiveness of these methods through the character of Winston Smith, who lives in constant fear of being discovered: "Your worst enemy, he reflected, was your own nervous system. At any moment the tension inside you was liable to translate itself into some visible symptom" (Orwell, "1984", p. 62). The Thought Police's ability to instill fear and paranoia ensures that dissent is almost impossible.

### **Newspeak and the Control of Language**

Language plays a crucial role in the Party's control over Oceania. Through the invention of Newspeak, a language designed to eliminate rebellious thoughts, the Party seeks to limit the range of thought itself. Syme, a character who works on the Eleventh Edition of the Newspeak Dictionary, explains the purpose of Newspeak: "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" (Orwell, "1984", p. 52). By reducing the complexity of language, the Party aims to eliminate any possibility of subversive thinking.

Newspeak is a tool for both surveillance and control. By limiting the vocabulary available to citizens, the Party controls how they think and communicate. This linguistic manipulation is a form of mental surveillance, ensuring that even internal dissent is impossible. The gradual erosion of language described by Orwell serves as a powerful metaphor for the erosion of individual freedom: "Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller" (Orwell, "1984", p. 52).

### **Historical Revisionism and the Ministry of Truth**

The Ministry of Truth, where Winston works, is responsible for the Party's propaganda and historical revisionism. The Ministry's role is to constantly rewrite history to align with the Party's current narrative. As Orwell writes, "Day by day and almost minute by minute the past was brought up to date. In this way every

prediction made by the Party could be shown by documentary evidence to have been correct; nor was any item of news, or any expression of opinion, which conflicted with the needs of the moment, ever allowed to remain on record" (Orwell, "1984", p. 35).

This manipulation of history serves to control the collective memory of the populace. By rewriting the past, the Party ensures that its version of events is the only one that exists. This control over history is a form of intellectual surveillance, erasing any evidence of alternative narratives or resistance. Orwell's depiction of the Ministry of Truth highlights the dangers of allowing those in power to control the narrative of history.

### **Psychological Impact**

The constant surveillance in "1984" has profound psychological effects on individuals. The lack of privacy induces a state of paranoia and helplessness, as citizens are aware that they are always being watched. Winston Smith reflects on this oppressive atmosphere: "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. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time" (Orwell, "1984", p. 6). This omnipresent fear breaks down trust among individuals, as anyone could be a spy for the Party.

### **The Dehumanization of Individuals**

Orwell's depiction of life in Oceania shows how surveillance dehumanizes individuals, reducing them to mere objects of observation and control. The constant monitoring strips citizens of their individuality and autonomy, turning them into compliant subjects of the state. Winston's sense of isolation and despair is a direct result of this dehumanizing surveillance: "He was alone. The past was dead, the future was unimaginable. What certainty had he that a single human creature now living was on his side?" (Orwell, "1984", p. 26).

The Party's control over personal relationships further illustrates this dehumanization. Sexual and romantic relationships are heavily regulated, and any expression of affection is seen as a threat to the Party's control. Winston's relationship with Julia represents a rebellion against this control, but it is ultimately doomed by the pervasive surveillance: "Their embrace had been a battle, the climax a victory. It was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act" (Orwell, "1984", p. 126). The destruction of their relationship demonstrates how the Party's surveillance extends into the most intimate aspects of life, breaking down human connections.

### **The Concept of Doublethink**

Orwell also explores the concept of doublethink, the ability to hold two contradictory beliefs simultaneously. This mental manipulation ensures that citizens accept and even embrace the Party's constantly shifting version of reality. Orwell explains doublethink as follows: "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..." (Orwell, "1984", p. 35). Through doublethink, the Party controls not just actions but thoughts, effectively obliterating personal autonomy and truth.

Doublethink is a form of psychological control that ensures loyalty to the Party. By forcing citizens to accept contradictory beliefs, the Party erodes their ability to think critically and independently. Winston struggles with doublethink, recognizing its destructive power: "To believe that the Party controlled the past, and to remember that they did not—that was doublethink" (Orwell, "1984", p. 35). The concept of doublethink illustrates how totalitarian regimes can manipulate reality to maintain their power, making it impossible for citizens to resist or even understand their oppression.

### **Relevance in Contemporary Society**

Orwell's "1984" serves as a timeless warning about the dangers of totalitarianism and the loss of privacy. In the contemporary world, issues of mass surveillance and data privacy have made Orwell's vision more relevant than ever. Governments and corporations have unprecedented access to personal information, raising concerns about potential abuses of power. Edward Snowden's revelations about NSA surveillance programs highlight how modern technology can be used to monitor citizens on a scale reminiscent of Orwell's dystopia.

### **Mass Surveillance and Data Privacy**

The rise of digital technology has enabled a level of surveillance that Orwell could scarcely have imagined. Governments and corporations collect vast amounts of data on individuals, often with little transparency or oversight. The use of surveillance cameras, internet monitoring, and data mining has created a reality where privacy is increasingly compromised. Orwell's depiction of telescreens and the Thought Police serves as a powerful metaphor for these contemporary issues, reminding us of the potential dangers of unchecked surveillance.

### **Manipulation of Information and Fake News**

The novel's depiction of the manipulation of truth and the rewriting of history resonates with current discussions about fake news and information control. Orwell's Ministry of Truth, responsible for propaganda and

historical revisionism, eerily mirrors today's concerns about media manipulation and the spread of disinformation. The ability of governments and powerful entities to shape public perception through the control of information is a central theme in "1984", highlighting the importance of a free and independent press in maintaining a healthy democracy.

### Psychological Impact and Social Media

Social media platforms have become a new frontier for surveillance and psychological manipulation. Algorithms track users' behavior, tailoring content to influence opinions and behaviors. This form of digital surveillance can create echo chambers and reinforce existing biases, much like the Party's propaganda in "1984". The psychological impact of living in a digitally monitored society can lead to increased anxiety, paranoia, and a sense of powerlessness, mirroring the experiences of Orwell's characters.

### Contemporary Examples of Orwellian Tactics

Several contemporary regimes and political movements have employed tactics reminiscent of those described in "1984". The use of mass surveillance in China, the manipulation of information in Russia, and the spread of disinformation by various actors globally all reflect Orwellian principles. These examples underscore the novel's enduring relevance and the need for vigilance in protecting civil liberties and democratic principles.

### CONCLUSION

George Orwell's "1984" remains a critical text for understanding the implications of surveillance and totalitarian control. Through his portrayal of a dystopian society, Orwell highlights the fragility of personal freedom and the importance of vigilance against the encroachment of oppressive powers. As modern societies grapple with the complexities of surveillance and data privacy, "1984" offers a stark reminder of the potential consequences of unchecked authority. The novel's enduring relevance underscores the need to protect civil liberties and resist the allure of totalitarian solutions to complex social problems. Orwell's vision of a society where surveillance and control are omnipresent continues to resonate, serving as a cautionary tale about the potential dangers of allowing those in power to encroach upon individual freedoms. By examining the mechanisms of control in "1984", their psychological impacts, and their relevance in contemporary society, this article aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the balance between security and liberty in an increasingly monitored world.

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