



Orwellian Surveillance Vs. Modern-Day Surveillance: A Comparative Analysis Based On Orwell's 1984

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Abstract:

George Orwell's 1984 presents a dystopian vision of a totalitarian state where surveillance, propaganda, and control dominate every aspect of life. This research paper compares Orwell's depiction of surveillance with contemporary realities, exploring how governments, corporations, and technology influence privacy and personal freedom in the digital age. By analyzing Orwell's concepts of Big Brother, telescreens, Thought Police, and Newspeak, this paper highlights parallels with modern-day CCTV surveillance, mass data collection, social media monitoring, and AI-driven facial recognition. The study argues that while Orwell's world was fictional, his warnings about privacy erosion remain more relevant than ever. This paper delves into the striking similarities and differences between George Orwell's dystopian vision in "1984" and the realities of contemporary surveillance technologies. It explores the implications of these technologies on privacy, individual freedom, and societal control, providing a critical analysis of their ethical and social dimensions.

Key Words: Surveillance, Propaganda, Technology, Privacy, Monitoring

Introduction

George Orwell's "1984" is a seminal work that portrays a totalitarian regime exercising absolute control over its citizens through relentless surveillance. This paper aims to compare Orwell's fictional depiction with the current state of surveillance technology, examining how these technologies influence modern society.

n "1984," Orwell introduces the concept of "Big Brother," a figurehead representing the Party's omnipresent surveillance. Telescreens, hidden microphones, and the Thought Police are tools used to monitor and control the populace. The novel explores themes of privacy invasion, psychological manipulation, and the suppression of dissent.

Surveillance, in any land where it is ubiquitous and inescapable, generates distrust and divisions among its citizens, curbs their readiness to speak freely to each other, and diminishes their willingness to even dare to think freely. Ariel Dorfman (2014)

Orwell presented his readers with a nightmarish vision of the modern state, where privacy was neither seen as a fundamental right nor an acceptable ethics, nor as an indicator of the security of an effective democracy. In "1984", the right to privacy was brutally attacked, and such heinous invasions of one's privacy suggest something darker than a breach of personal freedom. According to Orwell, the loss of privacy was a moral and political transgression that clearly demonstrated the character and gravity of a developing totalitarian state. Even so, Orwell's warning was meant to highlight the atrocities of totalitarianism and the interminable state eavesdropping systems that were imposed on civilians in the middle of the 20th century. Henry. A Giroux (2014)

Relevance of Orwell's 1984 in present time:

Anything we say or do in the modern world can be instantly shared online and viewed by millions of people. After uploading, both the positive and, in fact, negative comments can be viewed by all people worldwide. Many people are concerned about their confidentiality in the current political atmosphere. The protagonist of George Orwell's "1984", Winston Smith, and everyone else of Oceania are being monitored by telescreens to prevent political radicals from taking control. Even in the safety of their own homes, the government keeps an eye on everything people do. The main objective of the Party is to enslave all Oceanian people, from their past to their language. Actually, the Party works to develop a new language "Newspeak" to get rid of any revolution. Everyone was watching and listening to everything they said and did. All across the city, cameras have been placed, and children have been taught to keep an eye on their guardians as spies. Since Thought Police can read people's minds, they are constantly being searched for. Even though the civilization Orwell portrays is not the same as ours, the modern world would appear to be exactly like 1984. Parmar.S (2022)

TV screens are monitoring you in "1984", and various persons have their eyes on you. These days, social media collects all of our online activities, such as comments, choices, and movement. This information fuels an all-knowing force that can forecast every decision we make. Parmar.S (2022)

Modern Surveillance Technologies

Today, surveillance agencies continue to function under the premise that the majority of people voluntarily transfer their private lives to organizations and the government agencies that spy on them. They thus put a lot of effort into appropriating new technology to further the goals of a readymade authoritarian state where the "electronic self" is controlled by the state. Instead of protecting the public from corporate interests, these organizations promote criminal activity and exploit corporate techniques for data mining to feed their personal purposes. Henry M. Girour (2014)

Thanks to Snowden, we also know that unknown volumes of like information are being extracted information from Internet and computer companies, including Microsoft, Yahoo, Google, Facebook, Paltalk, AOL, Skype, YouTube and Apple. The first thing to note about these data is that a mere generation ago, they did not exist. They are a new power in our midst, flowing from new technology, waiting to be picked up; and power, as always, creates temptation, especially for the already powerful. Our cellphones track our whereabouts. Our communications pass-through centralized servers and are saved and kept for a potential eternity in storage banks, from which they can be recovered and examined. Our purchases and contacts and illnesses and entertainments are tracked and agglomerated. If we are arrested, even our DNA can be taken and stored by the state. Today, alongside each one of us, there exists a second, electronic self, created in part by us, in part by others. This other self has become de facto public property, owned chiefly by immense data-crunching corporations, which use it for commercial purposes. Now government is reaching its hand into those corporations for its own purposes, creating a brand-new domain of the state-corporate complex. Jonathan Schell (2013)

Modern surveillance technologies have evolved significantly, encompassing CCTV cameras, internet monitoring, data mining, and facial recognition systems. These technologies are employed by governments and corporations for purposes ranging from national security to targeted advertising. While they offer benefits such as crime prevention and personalized services, they also pose significant risks to privacy and civil liberties.

Panoptical surveillance

Jeremy Bentham coined the term "panopticon" to refer to a building where only one inspector could watch over numerous inhabitants from a single location. Knowing that they were being watched, residents would refrain from actions that would result in consequences if they were discovered; this effect does not require that residents are actually being watched at all times; rather, it only requires that "the persons to be inspected should always feel themselves as if under inspection, at least as standing a great chance of being so" Bentham (1995)

Panoptical surveillance in "1984" is expressed in the following passage:

“There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. . . You had to live—did live, from habit that became instinct—in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and except in darkness, every movement scrutinized”. Orwell (2003)

In this presumption, Winston serves for the camera and self-censors, concealing his own ideas and opinions while feigning to think and believe the way he should. Yeo.M (2010)

Surveillance: Loss of privacy:

George Orwell examines the drastic loss of privacy in "1984," a future society in which Big Brother and the authorities have complete control over the general population. To guarantee that people have neither personal space nor freedom of thinking, the Party uses a variety of tactics. Every residence and public area have telescreens installed, which broadcast misinformation while also keeping an eye on the activities and discussions of the populace. People become continuously conscious that they are being observed as a result, which creates anxiety and self-censorship.

The Thought Police attack any indications of disobedience or unconventional thought, which is a further violation of privacy. They identify and suppress opposition through psychological control and surveillance. Even thoughts that are confidential are at risk since the Party uses Newspeak, a language intended to restrict the spectrum of ideas, to try to control its citizens' thoughts.

Orwell warns about the potential adverse effects of unbridled governmental authority and technological surveillance through his portrayal of the decline of privacy. In order to maintain a transparent and open society, it emphasizes how crucial it is to defend individual liberties and the right to privacy.

Telescreens were rarely out of reach of partygoers. The telescreen was unable to be turned off thus there was no relief from its continuous propagandizing. Yeo.M (2010)

“Day and night the telescreens bruised your ears with statistics proving that people today had more food, more clothes, better houses, better recreations—that they lived longer, worked shorter hours, were bigger, healthier, stronger, happier, more intelligent, better educated, than people of fifty years ago”. Orwell (2003)

Orwellian Surveillance vs. Modern-Day Surveillance

The surveillance system in Orwell's 1984 and modern-day surveillance shares several similarities but also have key differences in their methods, purpose, and impact on society. Orwell's surveillance was forced, while modern surveillance is often voluntarily accepted, though many do not fully realize its extent. There is comparison of Orwellian surveillance vs. modern surveillance in terms of technology, control, consent, consequences, and societal responses.

Purpose of Surveillance in Orwell's 1984 and Modern Day

Orwell's 1984

- Surveillance is a tool for absolute state control.
- The Party uses it to suppress dissent and maintain ideological purity.
- The Thought Police enforce conformity by monitoring even people's inner thoughts.

Modern Surveillance

- Surveillance today is justified under security and convenience (e.g., counterterrorism, crime prevention, personalized advertising).
- Governments and corporations collect data for national security, law enforcement, and profit motives.
- Some regimes use surveillance for political control (e.g., China's Social Credit System, Russia's internet censorship).
- Orwell's surveillance was overt and oppressive, designed to instill fear and obedience. In contrast, modern surveillance is often more subtle and justified by the need for security and efficiency. However, both raise critical ethical questions about consent, transparency, and the potential for abuse of power. The paper discusses how the normalization of surveillance can lead to a culture of self-censorship and conformity.

Implications for Society

The widespread use of surveillance technologies has profound implications for society. It challenges the balance between security and privacy, with potential consequences for democratic freedoms and human rights. The paper examines the psychological effects of living under constant surveillance, including the erosion of trust and the impact on personal autonomy.

Conclusion

Orwell's "1984" serves as a cautionary tale, urging us to critically evaluate the role of surveillance in contemporary society. As technology continues to advance, it is crucial to consider the ethical and social implications of surveillance, ensuring that it is used responsibly and does not infringe on individual freedoms. While contemporary monitoring quietly manipulates action through technological advances and data control, Orwell's surveillance resulted in physical tyranny and harsh punishment. Orwell envisioned a society in which social media, smart technologies, and digital footprints are used by the government to monitor people. But the question still stands: Are we voluntarily sacrificing our privacy in ways that Orwell never thought possible?

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