

Orwellian Authoritarianism, Technological Corporations, and the Looming Potential of a
Totalitarian Plutocracy

Brian McHatton

University of Oklahoma

Abstract

In the following research paper, I looked to analyze the commonalities between George Orwell's fictional super state, Oceania, and the real world's global technology companies. In my research I found that while Orwell primarily focused on warning the west of the toxicities of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, he stressed the qualities of free market, capitalism and democracy. These tenants are bastions for more countries than ever in today's society, it has also slowly put tech corporations in a position to perform similarly deceitful practices as authoritarian state. These companies could exercise even more influence over our lives and thinking than any governing state in history due to immerging world culture and sentiment that values access above privacy. The sacrificing of privacy, trust in economic tradition, and struggle to control mighty, multi-national companies puts people in harm's way of corporate overreach. These companies with the intimate role that they play in our lives, if untamed, could present threats to personal freedoms and thinking not even prophesized in Orwell's classic.

Orwellian Authoritarianism, Technological Corporations, and the Looming Potential of a
Totalitarian Plutocracy

Description

In Nineteen Eighty-Four, Oceania, the fictional nation of which the story takes place, is a communist regime which dominates every part of their inhabitants' lives. Through constant surveillance, control of resources, and centralization of information, the fictional superpower kept a stranglehold on its citizens. The three superpowers of Orwell's novels are in constant strife. All of them are too massive and have too many resources to be toppled without the other countries being depleted in the process of dealing a meaningful blow, yet the proles believe that one day the war will be won, and that through their patriotism at home and sacrifice that they help with the effort. Winston Smith, the main character and employee of the regime whose work consists of information manipulation, hated the government. From the inside the corrupt institution he witnessed all its awful practices which it imposed on its citizens, the cracks in Oceania's armor, and every lie and inconsistency the regime ever told. He knew that despite his efforts, the only hope to make change lied with the masses. "Until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious" (Orwell 67). Facets of life that are controlled almost entirely by the government include what they eat, think, watch, people they talk to, where they can go, what possessions they can have. Despite their miserable conditions, that was the way life was. The proles, or working class, had the power to make change, but they never had the ambitions. In the end of the novel, there is not a great rebellion, only Winston changed forcibly to accept his place under the regime, a technique used by Orwell to emphasize the hopelessness of authoritarianism. Although entertaining, Nineteen

Eighty-Four's purpose was to be a warning, and hopefully not a foretelling story about the dangers of emergent, undemocratic ideologies for the people of western countries.

Analysis

George Orwell was born in India in 1903 and attended school in Britain starting in 1911. In the first part of the century, up until World War II, Europe experienced a jolt in patriotism that was fueled by the previous age of colonialism. Powerful, centralized regimes rose to power throughout Europe. These countries were ran, often times, by single party governments, like Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, and were backed by the masses. Orwell, growing up and living in Europe most of this time, saw the threat of such governments first hand. He detested authoritarianism, joining military efforts in support of the Republican militia in Spain during the Spanish Civil War in the 1930's. After being wounded in battle, he returned home to England and experienced the second world war from a spectator's perspective. Following the fall of fascist states in Central and Southern Europe, the Soviet Union moved closer, and communism began to spread across Eastern Europe and other parts of the globe. Now, in modern day, the world is headed towards rapid democratization after the fall of the Soviet Union. Militaristic, authoritarian states have largely disappeared from the developed world, due to failure of alternative governments and the emergence of powerful, world market forces. However, the threat to the people then was real, and even to some enticing, seeing the success of the Soviets during World War Two.

The third line of The Party's slogan in Nineteen Eighty-Four is "Ignorance is Strength," (Orwell 5). The party slogan appears three separate times throughout the first part of the book, emphasizing the stress put on by the party to control Oceania's thinking. The Party is the beneficiate not the people. They thrive off the population's lack of involvement, interest, and

knowledge. Changes can't be made if problems are not recognized. In Nineteen Eighty-Four, the proles were characterized as a misinformed, patriotic mass. With every infringement of their rights and squandering of rations, the proles rolled with the punches. Patriotism is a cornerstone for many centralized states- from Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany to Imperial Japan and Communist Russia, the people bought in to the ideal of country before individual. A greater purpose was at hand, usually war, that would ultimately bring pride to the people of the country (e.g. Nazi Germany launched military campaigns based on principles of genetic superiority and the need for expansion to account for growing populations). The proles are no different- they believed that eventually Oceania would win the global war. Propaganda instilled the masses with pride, and war was perceived as an entity of reclamation and plunder. Citizens of these countries were happy by the security of the states and the immense amount of pride during the eras. Even if they were not happy or prosperous, there was not much to be done. Often, the people of these countries would live out normal lives like nothing was going on. Restrictive livelihood was the status quo. In the novel, the proles were concerned with relatively menial things. So long as the people involved were either happy or too scared to resist the government, there was no change. People were usually unaware however of the covert operations and remained ignorant as to the corrupt, opaque governmental practices of the ruling regime. That, or were content with the practices of the government. Being a part of, at their peak, thriving countries was often enticing and made their lives easier. Prior to Nazi rule in Germany, the Weimar Republic had accrued an incredible amount of debt as well as national shame under the War Guilt Clause in the Treaty of Versailles. With the rise of The National Socialist party, people's lives improved, and found it hard to question the government when they had brought them out of such a troublesome time in their country's history. A lot of what is presumed about the government and party members in

Nineteen Eighty-Four is that their actions are out of self-preservation. Their views are righteous, and through mass propaganda people believe them- they have the trust of the people to keep them safe from the other superpowers and competing ideologies. Proles rely on The Party to tell them the truth and what's going on with the world, give them entertainment (in the form of state sponsored shows), a chance at prosperity (via war and lotteries), and hope (through nationalism). All these things keep them on good terms with their citizens, and at the same time, the Oceanic Government maintains a hold on their people. To the citizens of the country, the government is indispensable. The Party fills the holes in everyone's life: the government gives the inhabitants something to love when there is no love to be had, it gives them hope in a trying time where bombs fall and delapidate London, the government is the only source from the outside world, the only truth that the citizens know in the story, it gives people a shot at bettering their life through obedience- making obedient people icons and idolizing the efforts of the party, and it gives the illusion that an end to the war is right around the corner- from state news casts to "Victory Gin". Oceania was bettering its people's lives, but what the people did not know was that they could be so much better, and that if the common man felt like they were thriving, so was the government.

Interpretation

Orwell's fictional state mirrored, in many ways, real life authoritarian governments. The same tactics of controlling the thinking and lives of citizens in the novel was eerily realistic and reminiscent of more extreme times in world politics. Orwell believed that the ignorance of the misinformed masses as to the operations of the government was what lead them to them being subjugated by such forces and being so unquestioning. The proles of the novel mirrored the ignorance of the people of many of these historic, totalitarian nations- through control of

information and pro-party advocacy via propaganda, many populations living under oppressive regimes did not understand the larger entity at hand. Even if people were aware that things were going bad, they were scared to rise and cast the first stone. Both sides of the spectrum between fear and love of country kept the government and rulers in power. Furthermore, as the government became more central to the people's lives, citizens became more reliant on their leaders for everything they needed. The government became their lifeline. People of these authoritarian states were sheep among a few shepherds, and an increased dependency lead to a negative feedback cycle to where citizens lost their rights and had to rely on the government for more things, and so on and so forth until the government had full jurisdiction over people's livelihood.

Evaluation

As we embrace capitalist values in an age of increasing technological dependency, ones that Orwell saw as the counter to totalitarianism and a pillar of democratic states, we edge more towards a vulnerable position of giving up our privacy and trust to more influential powers.

Global tech corporations have come into prominence because of cultural acceptance and the global market. Facebook, the largest social media company in the world, has over two billion monthly users, and Apple has become the world's most valuable company at over one trillion dollars. These companies, and ones similar to them, have become central to many people's lives, and for some even necessary to uphold their standard of living and livelihood. Although as a society, we do not hold these businesses to the same standards culturally as our government. Through democratic tradition, many western nations believe strongly in a transparent government. In the United States, citizens can see which representative voted in favor of what bill, political muckraking is still common practice, and people can be

however much informed or involved in government as they choose to be. However, in regard to companies, the public's interest and ability to access corporate practices are not as culturally desired, and many people in the modern day are choosing access over their own security and privacy, regardless of what repercussions may be potentially at hand. According to a study done by Deloitte, over ninety percent of people agree to legal terms of services without reading. These companies use personal data given over by consumers in exchange for their services to sell to third parties or use for their own benefits. If the public is not careful, this could lead to a pseudo-corporatocracy, in which companies exercise control over people through their pre-established influence in their lives. These companies could push agendas, control news, know what people do and think. We are putting companies into a potentially abusable role over our lives. Orwell advocated for capitalism, free markets, and a more modern vision of socialism, but what he did not warn us about in his novel was how to combat these entities and ideologies if they get out of control. His message was geared towards governments not colossal corporation.

Online companies could potentially thrive using similar tactics as Oceania did in Nineteen Eighty-Four: through lengthy, imposing, monotonous Terms of Agreements, the company dissuades people from reading what they are opting into, promoting ignorance of the user community. Information is power, and through these tactics fashioned around a culture that is willing to sacrifice privacy for access of services, the companies can almost guarantee that they hold most of the cards. Earlier this year in April 2018, Mark Zuckerberg, CEO and Founder of Facebook, was questioned over his flagship company. On the topic of the Terms and Conditions that are required for a user to join the website, CNBC reported that Zuckerberg felt like not many bothered reading the Terms, but they were accessible for everyone if they wanted to. Another of the bigger talking points in the same senate hearing was the company's failures to

report security leaks to over eighty million accounts to the American Government, and these leaks happened three years ago. For three years people were uninformed that their information was being sold. Although, through Facebook's Terms of Service, one might think that it is implied that people know that they are opting into datamining business practices that has become a pillar of Facebook's economic model. Through our democratic principles we have the ability to limit companies and define corporate security infringements, however we don't. We are so unbothered by surrendering our security that it has become second nature to scroll down to the bottom of a Terms of Service page as fast as possible to hit 'agree.' This is the type of ignorance that Orwell warned us about just aimed towards companies.

Tech companies also further their role into people's lives, and, like oppressive governments, benefit off of increased dependency and shaping resources, familiarity, and information into ways they want their consumers to view it. Companies like Apple have contained the Internet, asserted themselves at every facet of life, and as they improve, become more convenient and form the semantic web of the future, they do more good. Apple now brings us news, brings entertainment to our finger tips, lets us feel more connected to people we know, keeps updating for the betterment of society, but at the same time these are selfish endeavors for the company. We keep going back to Apple for these things, we increase our dependency on a corporation for nearly every part of our lives, and they reap the reward for our dependency much like The Party does in Nineteen Eighty-Four. Apple makes fiscal gains, their services that they provide to us are for self-preservation and their own prosperity, not for our betterment. The Party is everywhere the people of Oceania look, think, and interact with, and it serves them with a hive mind of people. These companies have become an intimate part of our lives, just like totalitarians states, fictional or not, have become integral to their citizens.

Apple's and other tech giants' propaganda is in the culture it breeds. The usefulness, novelty, ease, and accessibility is what makes it appeal to consumers. Like with many Orwellian warnings pointed out in this research, it has reached a point of necessity by near opposite means that totalitarian governments have in the past but can still potentially have the same jurisdiction over people.

Since the Modern Era, emphasis has been put on the individual and not the group, we are the center of our own cognizance and consciousness- we make decisions for ourselves and those who we relate closely with, no longer so much for country. We have become the number one priority in our society- we are the greater force that we answer to. We have become self-serving and seek out what we are interested in. Propaganda doesn't cloud our views of what we want as prominently as it used to. The democracy of the open market allows the cream rise to the top, masses are more informed, we have more rights than ever and an increasing amount of ways to exercise them. Yet with all this being said, there is still a nebulous vibe coming from these companies who only feed the masses information when it is convenient, our views can be constricted to what Apple says as a gatekeeper for its own platform. As a society, we have put ourselves in an abusable position, and it is only through good faith that businesses don't encroach on simple rights that have come to expected in a democratic world.

Engagement

George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four accomplished what it was supposed to- properly villainize authoritarian regimes in an era of political uncertainty and the eroding of democratic political values. Nineteen Eighty-four accompanied by some of Orwell's other works like Animal Farm have been claimed to have been some of the most socially and politically influential, fictional novels of the past century.

Conclusion

Orwell did a great job at conveying the dangers of authoritarian governments, however what he failed to recognize was that as the threat of tyrannical government was fended off, a new entity was being put into an abusable position. Corporations have made their way into our lives and are so involved that it puts them in a position of overreach. The fear is, is that the general public does not have the willingness, nor the resources to be able to unveil unwelcomed infringements on their livelihood. Furthermore, there is a threat of ill-use and abusing of government systems or secrecy from such entities that would make it possible for a multinational corporatocracy to impose itself onto the democratic world. Although that it is an unlikely occurrence due to our faith in government as a safeguard from the infringement of rights by industry, there is a recognizable spectrum of balance that needs to be watched. From one side there is the safety of a totalitarian regime- do the right things and often times nothing can go against one's interests. On the other side of the spectrum there is the promise of free markets and liberty, but even these in excess could lead to so much influence over people that it too could impose itself on every portion of life just as affectively as a fictional totalitarian regime.

References

Woodcock, G. George Orwell. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-Orwell>

History.com Editors. Red Scare. Retrieved from <https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/red-scare>

Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. The Fascist Era The Rise of Musolini . Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy/The-Fascist-era>

History.com Editors. Weimar Republic. Retrieved from <https://www.history.com/topics/germany/weimar-republic>

Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. Democracy. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/democracy/The-spread-of-democracy-in-the-20th-century>

Number of Monthly Active Facebook Users Worldwide as of 2nd Quarter 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>

Pingitore, G. To Share or Not to Share. Retrieved from <https://www2.deloitte.com/insights/us/en/industry/retail-distribution/sharing-personal-information-consumer-privacy-concerns.html>

Kharpal, A. Mark Zuckerberg's Testimony: Here are the Key Points You Need to Know. Retrieved from <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/04/11/facebook-ceo-mark-zuckerberg-testimony-key-points.html>

Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. Propaganda. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/propaganda>

