

# Big Brother, Bullwinkle and the daily news

Whoever said that there was nothing new under the sun wasn't reading the newspaper under the summer sun in Austin.

George Orwell was in his mid-40s when he finished his most famous novel, "1984." He had a well-earned middle-aged pessimism about human nature. He had experienced firsthand the horrors of civil war in Spain, watched the civilized world nearly destroyed in World War II, witnessed manipulation of the truth by totalitarian regimes in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, and looked on as world powers switched enemies and friends at the opening of the Cold War. All the while life for the common man in Orwell's post-war London became bleaker and colder. Basic necessities were rationed, and new tensions among world powers made peace seem fragile to Londoners who had survived the German blitz.

Orwell's response, and his great gift to us, was "1984," a warning that ordinary citizens could be stripped of their freedom to think, to speak and to love. Big Brother, telescreens, Newspeak and the Thought Police have become part of our cultural vocabulary. So has the adjective "Orwellian." Those who prefer movies to books were given another great gift in 1984, the brilliant film version of Orwell's novel with a stunning realization of the future as Orwell had conceived of it in 1949. Watch John Hurt as Winston Smith and Richard Burton as O'Brien, and I guarantee you will never forget how easy it is for those who control the present to control the past and, by Orwell's seamless logic, the future. Just dictate a new text and paste it and a new photograph into the most ephemeral repository of our collective cultural knowledge, an old newspaper. The individual human being can be "vaporized" and lifted clean out of the stream of history.



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The new Austin under the summer sun is far removed from London in "1984." Light, warmth, wealth, comfort, a surplus of luxuries, peace and security. The newspaper even reflects a growing concern with helping those whom Orwell defined as the proles, the permanent economic underclass in his and our cities. In the world at large, the Orwellian triad of superpowers that threatened peace and unsettled our psyches is no more.

What could disturb the serenity of such a brave new world as ours? A thing that even the inventive mind of George Orwell could not have foreseen. Human beings rushing to give up their privacy, to subject themselves to constant camera and microphone surveillance, to have their private actions appear on the "telescreens" of countless strangers. To anyone who spent time behind the Iron Curtain pre-1988, as I did, the notion that individuals would volunteer to forfeit their right to personal privacy borders on obscenity. But I read it in the newspaper July 3. The concept and reality of this program are not bad enough. The show blasphemously bills itself as "Big Brother," "the new voyeuristic series, inspired by George Orwell's '1984.'" A moral tale about totalitarian forces crushing the human spirit in naked pursuit of power, about loss of the ability to feel love, to trust our neighbors and children, to preserve even the smallest personal tokens of the past, has been trivialized as mindless voyeuristic entertainment.

In a Sunday column, Ellen Goodman blamed the media for programs such as "Big Brother." In recent weeks, articles have appeared in the Statesman decrying the loss of the handwritten personal letter and even the art of stenography, as electronic forms of communication and memory processing have made the physical recording of thought more ephemeral than the daily newspaper or Gov. George W. Bush's recollection of his own past military service. Orwell himself could not have conceived that the past would not be there for the present to control.

I am now slightly older than Orwell was when he wrote "1984." I wondered whether middle age had just made me curmudgeonly and sour. So what if people want to let total strangers see and hear their every action? Then I thought about Chris Garcia's review last month of "The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle". Like Winston Smith rewriting the past, he flatly declares that the original cartoon series was "laugh-bankrupt." This about a sweet and charming program that could count on its adult viewers to understand and take intellectual pleasure in the episode title "Morning Becomes Electra-Cuted." The media is to blame, but we have also become "culture-bankrupt."

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