


Why Orwell's 1984 could be about now

adapted from an article by Jean Seaton

- 1 Reading 1984, George Orwell's claustrophobic fable of totalitarianism, is still a shock. First comes the start of recognition: we recognise what he describes. Doublethink (holding two contradictory thoughts at the same time), Newspeak, the Thought Police, the Ministry of Love that deals in pain, despair and annihilates any dissident, the Ministry of Peace that wages war: Orwell opened our eyes to how regimes worked.
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- 2 But now we can read 1984 differently: with anxious apprehension, applying it to measure where we, our nations and the world have got to on the road map to a hell Orwell described. Prophetic? Possibly. But stirring, moving, creative, undeniable and helpful? Yes. A book published on 8 June 1949, written out of the battered landscape of total war, in a nation hungry, tired and grey, feels more relevant than ever before, because Orwell's 1984 also arms us.
 - 3 The book defines the peculiar characteristics of modern tyranny. Winston Smith, the protagonist, works as a censor in the Ministry of Truth in a constant updating of history to suit present circumstances and shifting alliances. He and his fellow workers are controlled as a mass collective by the all-seeing and all-knowing presence of Big Brother. In 1984 television screens watch you, and everyone spies on everyone else. Today it is social media that collects every gesture, purchase, comment we make online, and feeds an omniscient presence in our lives that can predict our every preference. Modelled on consumer decisions, where the user is the commodity that is being marketed, the harvesting of those preferences for political campaigns is now distorting democracy.
 - 4 Orwell understood that oppressive regimes always need enemies. In 1984 he showed how these can be created arbitrarily by whipping up popular feeling through propaganda. Now political, religious and commercial organisations all trade in whipping up feelings. Orwell uncannily identified 36 that such movements can elicit: and of course Winston observes it in himself. So, by implication, might we in ourselves.

- 5 Then there is his iconic dictator Big Brother: absurd and horrifying in equal measure. Orwell's writing 37 the giant '-isms' that disfigured the 20th Century. Orwell fought against Fascism as a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War but realised the hollow promise of Communism, when the anti-Stalinist group he was fighting for was hunted down by the pro-Stalin faction. He witnessed first-hand the self-deception of true believers. Today there is another set of '-isms', such as nationalism and populism that operate through the mobilisation of that most dangerous of feelings, resentment. And everywhere you look in the contemporary world, 'strong' men are in positions of power. They share the need to crush opposition, a fanatical terror of dissent and self-promotion. Big Brothers are no longer a joke but strut the world.
- 6 But the greatest horror in Orwell's dystopia is the systematic stripping of meaning out of language. The regime aims to eradicate words and the ideas and feelings they embody. Its real enemy is reality. Tyrannies attempt to make understanding the real world impossible: seeking to replace it with phantoms and lies. The terror in 1984 is the annihilation of the self and the destruction of the capacity to recognise the real world.
- 7 You cannot separate Orwell's work from the man. He is increasingly viewed as a kind of a saint, but how he would laugh at the statues of him that are sprouting up. His views towards feminists (though not women), vegetarians and other groups would hardly pass the test now. But he was a man who lived by his beliefs. He made himself genuinely poor; he fought for what he thought was right; he was unfailingly generous and kind to other writers, and yet he taught himself to try and see the world as it was, not how he would like it to be. He was never compliant, and he forensically unearthed for our gaze the worst of himself.
- 8 It is not only that we live in a world transformed by Orwell's insights in that it shapes how we see oppression. But 1984 is also a handbook for difficult times. Knowledge is a kind of strength and we are all being tested.

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