
Big Brother

Nineteen Eighty-Four (commonly written as *1984*) is a dystopian novel by the English writer George Orwell, published in 1949. The book tells the story of Winston Smith and his degradation by the totalitarian state in which he lives. Along with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, it is among the most famous and cited dystopias in literature.

It has been translated into 62 languages and has left a profound impression upon the English language itself. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, its terminology and its author have become bywords when discussing privacy and state-security issues. The term "Orwellian" has come to describe actions or organizations reminiscent of the totalitarian society depicted in the novel.

Nineteen Eighty-Four has, at times, been seen as revolutionary and politically dangerous and therefore was banned by many libraries in various countries, not mentioning totalitarian regimes.

In the book, Orwell displays his perception of a dystopia in 1984. Surmised technological advances, such as telescreens, are used to the benefit of the party and to exploit greater control over the masses, not to improve quality of life as intended. Elaborate strategies, such as perpetual warfare, are used to deny the masses, or proles, the education needed to understand the potential for a better life.

United Kingdom

Amongst the western democracies, the United Kingdom is perhaps the country subject to the most surveillance and critics would argue that the country is moving towards creating an Orwellian society.

A YouGov poll published on December 4, 2006, indicated that 79% of those interviewed agreed that Britain has become a 'surveillance society'. In 2004 the Government's own Information Commissioner, talking about the proposed British national identity database gave a warning of this, stating, "My anxiety is that we don't sleepwalk into a surveillance society." Other databases causing him concern are the National Child Database, the Office for National Statistics' Citizen Information Project, and the NHS National Programme for IT.

In 2004 it was estimated that the United Kingdom was monitored by over four million CCTV cameras, some with a facial recognition capacity, with practically all town centres under surveillance. Serious concerns have been raised that the facial biometric information which will be stored on a central database through the ID Card scheme could be linked to facial recognition systems and state-owned CCTV cameras to identify individuals anywhere in the UK, or even to compile a database of wanted citizens' movements without their knowledge or consent. Currently, in the City of Westminster, microphones are being fitted next to CCTV cameras. Westminster council claims that they are simply part of an initiative against urban noise, and will not "be used to snoop", but comments from a council spokesman appear to imply that they have been deliberately designed to capture an audio stream alongside the video stream, rather than simply reporting noise levels.

In London, the Oyster card payment system can track the movement of individual people through the public transport system, although an anonymous option is available, while the London congestion charge uses computer imaging to track car number plates.

Across the country efforts are underway to increasingly closely track all road vehicle movements, initially using a nationwide network of roadside cameras connected to automatic number plate recognition systems ("Project Laser"). In the longer term mandatory onboard vehicle telematics systems are also suggested, to facilitate road charging.

The British Police hold records of 5.5 million fingerprints and over 3.4 million DNA samples on the National DNA Database. There is increasing use of roadside fingerprinting - using new police powers to check identity. Concerns have been raised over the unregulated use of biometrics in schools, affecting children as young as three.

In 2002 the UK government announced plans to extend the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act, so that at least 28 government departments would be given powers to browse citizens' web, email, telephone and fax records, without a warrant and without a subject's knowledge. Public and security authorities made a total of 440,000 requests to monitor people's phone and internet use in 2005-6.

What do you think? Are the civil liberties of British people being infringed upon?

Check out the following website to find out the latest on the issue:

<http://search.bbc.co.uk/cgi-bin/search/results.pl?scope=all&edition=i&q=cctv>

The Soviet Union under Stalin provided much of Orwell's inspiration for his description of Oceanian society.