

Are we headed to Room 101?

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Abstract: *1984, written in 1949 by George Orwell, is a dystopian novel about the future of society under totalitarian rule after some sort of nuclear confrontation between the major super powers in the world (at that time). Even though the world described by Orwell has not come to be, could his writing nonetheless be predictive of the decline of democracy and freedom in the United States? Is it possible that the U.S. will fall under totalitarian rule? Do the current trends indicate this is the case? Are the appropriate mechanisms in place to allow such a change? To answer these questions, a convergent mixed-methods methodology was used. The qualitative portion includes the analysis and integration of theories from the various disciplines. The quantitative portion includes historical trend analysis and recent observations. In addition, findings of past studies involving applicable disciplinary theories will be included in the analysis. The results indicate that the United States is susceptible and does exhibit many troubling tendencies. However, a glimmer of hope exists as long as the two ideologically opposed major parties continue to trade power.*

Keywords: political science; history; psychology; sociology; neuroscience; linguistics; communication

Introduction

1984, written in 1949 by George Orwell, is a dystopian novel about the future of society under totalitarian rule after a nuclear confrontation between major super powers. The novel paints a very unpleasant view of life under a totalitarian government. There is almost a complete lack of privacy. Telescreens, which transmit and receive simultaneously, are in the houses of members of the outer party, creating the perception of constant monitoring and surveillance from “Big Brother.” There are also signs throughout the city that remind citizens that “Big Brother is watching You.” In addition, emotions and personal connections are discouraged. Language and thinking are limited. The use of propaganda to instill hatred against the “enemy” is constant. Death and disappearance due to acts of government is common, although individuals are not allowed to think about those who are vanished by government, as they are “unpersons.” Facts are alterable by government, but even changes



that contradict other standing “facts” are simply accepted without question. Information, in general, is controlled and limited by government.

Although Orwell’s predictions did not come true by 1984, could his writing be nonetheless predictive about the decline of democracy and freedom in the United States? Is it possible that the U.S. will fall under totalitarian rule? Do the current trends indicate this is the case, or are the appropriate mechanisms in place to allow such a change? These are complex questions that could not possibly be answered using one perspective or set of data alone. Therefore, this paper will explore those questions with an interdisciplinary focus on specific elements of the world presented by Orwell, comparing them to what is possible and what is and has been observed in the United States. Using these techniques will allow for possible forecasting of future U.S. scenarios.

In order to answer the main question of whether or not Orwell’s writing was predictive of things to come from an interdisciplinary perspective, it is necessary to break it into smaller questions. While there are many possibilities, this paper will focus on two: How are totalitarian governments formed and maintained? Is it possible for government to rewrite history and control information? Each question will be considered through several of the following disciplinary lenses: history, political science, sociology, psychology, neuroscience, or linguistics. The unique offerings of each will be synthesized for the purpose of appropriate forecasting.

Methodology

The analysis for this study follows the recommendations for interdisciplinary research provided by Repko (2012). For each question, the appropriate theories and findings from each discipline were explored and then synthesized to forecast the possibility of the results studied. Each area addresses the sub-question, “Is it possible?” before moving to synthesis and application to the current situation in the United States. To accomplish these tasks, a convergent mixed-methods methodology was used. The qualitative portion includes the analysis and integration of theories from the various disciplines. The quantitative portion includes historical trend analysis and observations of more recent events. In addition, findings of past studies involving applicable disciplinary theories were included in the analysis.

Totalitarian Government Formation & Survival

Political Science

Political science focuses on relationships and legitimacy of power (Repko, Newell, Szostak, 2012). There are several theorists that have supported the notion that government rule by an elite few is somewhat inevitable. These scholars and their work fall under “elite theory,” although they each have their own take on it. Vilfredo Pareto, who based his version on the work of Marx and Rousseau, believed that all complex societies inevitably end up with



skewed economic distributions with an economic elite that represent a “numerical minority” (Mayhew & Schollaert, 1980, p. 25). Robert Michels’ “iron law of oligarchy” posits that large, complex systems will eventually end up as oligarchies, with power concentrated in the hands of an elite few (Michels, 1958). C. Wright Mills viewed the elite as a “coalition of the corporate rich, military warlords, and servile political directorate” (Barrow, 2007, p. 401).

Does the United States have an elite that matches any of these definitions? An economic elite, as described by Pareto, is easiest to study. An analysis of the portion of the income share that is held by the bottom 90% of the population in the United States since 1917 indicates a clear pattern of decline since the 1970s. While it is possible that such a decline could be followed by an increase, as seen in the 1940s, without any active policies to encourage such an increase, it seems unlikely (National Bureau of Economic Research, n.d.).

Although not an exact representation of the elite overall, looking at former President Donald Trump’s cabinet selections, which consisted of “billionaire businessmen, well-connected corporate executives, retired military brass, and conservative politicians” (Mantel, 2019, p. 173), it is easy to see the similarities to Mills’ definition of elite. These were the individuals that were tasked with providing direction to all of the major areas of the federal bureaucracy.

Democratic backsliding is another important theory to apply to this question. Rather than looking at dramatic shifts in power or major events that drive regime change, democratic backsliding draws attention to the various and subtle changes that undermine democratic foundations (Lust & Waldner, 2015). Huq & Ginsberg (2018) refer to it as “constitutional retrogression” (p. 78), and they focus on three “institutional predicates of democracy” (p. 78): competitive elections, rights to political speech and association, and the administrative and adjudicative rule of law. Changes in these areas, as well as a decrease in constitutional knowledge, an increase in economic inequality, and global patterns of democratic breakdown, can, and are, creating the environment for authoritarianism to emerge in the United States (Huq & Ginsberg, 2018). Many have suggested that many of former President Trump’s personal behaviors are consistent with backsliding: criticizing various democratic institutions (e.g., justice department, free press), praising of foreign authoritarian leaders (e.g., North Korea’s Kim Jong-un), asserting his ability to undo constitutionally-supported, birthright citizenship with an executive order (Nexon, 2018).

The appropriate role of power and ability to control individuals its contingent upon one’s view of human nature, which draws on political philosophy, a subdiscipline of political science. If one believes that humans are brutal or lazy by nature, like political philosophers Hobbes and Machiavelli, it would be easy for that person to support a totalitarian style of government. Hobbes viewed humans as savage and selfish, meaning submission to an all-powerful authority was the only way to protect oneself from constant survival state (Portis, 2008). Machiavelli felt that good leaders were those that did what was necessary to maintain stability of their power and the state (Portis, 2008).



Do those in government share the views of Hobbes or Machiavelli? One way of studying this could be to study the various laws that have been proposed—who proposed them, who voted for them, and how they match up with the philosophies of Hobbes or Machiavelli. However, an easier approach is to look at presidents, specifically the former president, Trump. While not scientific, a simple Google search and qualitative assessment of article titles, can be helpful in assessing what has been written. Googling “Trump and Machiavelli” or “Trump and Hobbes” brings pages of articles with titles focusing on similarities between Trump and each philosopher. On the other hand, Googling the former president’s name with philosophers who had more positive views about humans and government, such as Plato and Aristotle, results in different types of titles (Portis, 2008). In the case of Plato, the article titles are focused on what Plato’s philosophies would help predict about Trump. In the case of Aristotle, the titles all seem to be about what Trump could or should learn from Aristotle. Overall, this qualitative assessment indicates that Trump is seen as having views more similar to Hobbes and Machiavelli.

Another way to study the view of human nature in society, as well as the elite theories, is to look at organizations. As pointed out by Handel (2003), organizations “shape the broader society” (p. 371). While employee ownership and more democratic organizational structures have emerged in various pockets of society, they are lacking a guiding ideology to help solidify such changes (Handel, 2003). There are other challenges to such structures as well, especially in larger, more complex organizations. Overall, the bureaucratic structures and the “iron law of oligarchy” seem to win out in most cases. In other cases, social engineering is used to compel loyalty to the organization and leaders (Handel, 2003).

History

History focuses on the “people, events, and movements of human civilizations past and present” (Repko, 2012, p. 107). There are several theories from the discipline of history that can assist in the understanding of totalitarian government formation and continuation. Many historical theories rely on the assumption that civilizations and governments go through cycles, creating cyclical theory (Persons, 1954). The variance between such theories is the length of those cycles and driving factors. According to Henry Adam’s Pendulum Theory, civilizations oscillate between centralization and diffusion about every twelve years (Hughes, 1999). Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., on the other hand, saw boredom with selfish motives as driving a transition between private interest and public interest every thirty years (Hughes, 1999).

Measuring changes between public and private interest could be done by looking at various laws that have been passed to support the public interest versus private interest. One could also look at government spending to look for priorities. However, it might be easier to look for transitions in government by looking at who has won the presidency over time, using the assumption that Democrats align with centralization and public interests and Republicans align with diffusion and private interest preferences. The table below shows which party controlled the White House between 1901 and 2017. While there were a few transitions that



occurred at the 12-year mark, transitions at the eight year mark were most common, with an average of 9.66 years per transition. Whether or not this is truly reflective of a preference for anything but change every few terms is up for debate. However, it does show that there are somewhat regular transitions that occur in the government between one party and the other versus one party dominating.

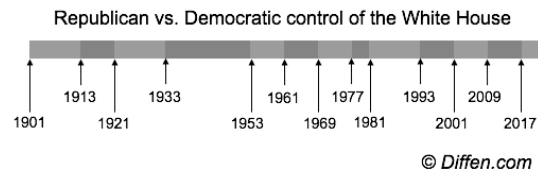


Figure 1 Republican vs. democratic control of the White House

Psychology

Psychology focuses on human behavior and the external and internal factors that affect human behavior (Repko, 2012). There are several theories from psychology that could help answer the first question in this study. Two important ones come from social psychology: system justification theory and terror management theory. System justification theory supports actions that defend the status quo, as people want to believe the systems they live under are legitimate and just. According to this theory, it is easier to accept whatever is than to deal with the uncertainty of any alternative, especially in situations where individuals feel powerless to change it (Vargas, Paez, Khan, Liu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2018). An extreme version of system justification theory can be seen in the patriotism debates in the United States. While some view questioning authority and holding government accountable as a democratic right and responsibility, others view it and frame it as anti-patriotic (Alexandrovna, 2011). Such blind defense of government is compatible with a totalitarian mindset.

Terror management theory focuses on “how humans seek self-esteem and worldview validation to manage death-related anxiety” (Plusnin, Pepping, & Kashima, 2018, p. 307). An important component of this is close relationships, which studies have shown to serve as a “buffer” for this anxiety (Plusnin, Pepping, & Kashima, 2018). This explains why totalitarian governments try to control emotions and relationships, with the exception of the relationship with the leader. Evidence of this was present in *1984*, as Winston became seemingly less afraid (until Room 101) about dying once he was in the relationship with Julia. In the United States, there does not seem to be evidence of preventing close relationships. However, there are studies that suggest that social media and the rise of mediated communication can contribute to feelings of isolation (Ludden, 2018). While the government does not control these platforms, the isolation can promote vulnerabilities in a democratic society.

Psychology also plays a role in the development of the religious-like adoration of leadership found in totalitarian governments. Such systems of political organization promote and instill a belief that a citizen’s sole purpose in life is to bring glory to the leader (Kim & Kim, 2008). An example of this can be seen in North Korea, where leaders are viewed as “divine beings”

(Kim & Kim, 2008, p. 23). In the United States, the transition to more candidate-centered campaigns mostly due an increase in social media use, has changed the nature of presidential authority and the interpretation of popular mandates, creating an environment where the president feels more legitimized in acting on his/her own versus in line with tradition or party (Barbour & Wright, 2015).

Sociology

Sociology looks at the “social nature of societies and the human interactions within them” (Repko, 2012, p. 106). From this discipline, social control theory is helpful in the analysis. Social control theory suggests that relational ties to family, friends, and society discourage deviant behavior (Wiatrowski, Griswold, & Roberts, 1981). The application of this is a bit tricky, however. On one hand, totalitarian governments, at least the one depicted in *1984*, discourage connections and emotions, which would seem to reduce the influence of such connections on curbing undesirable behavior. However, they refer to government as “Big Brother” and call the torture group the “Ministry of Love” in the book, and other actual totalitarian governments in history have employed similar tactics in their efforts to promote, or perhaps, demand loyalty to the leadership. Therefore, in a twisted way, they are provoking the social mechanisms necessary to discourage deviance, but in an artificial and forced sense.

In the United States, social connections are supported, and social media platforms play a large role in facilitating those connections. However, because individuals have the ability to shape their own social platforms, there is a tendency to create “echo chambers” with those with similar views. In addition, user activity is used to maximize the effectiveness of targeted political and commercial advertisements, which further polarizes society (Gillani, Yuan, Saveski, Vosoughi, & Roy, 2018). Therefore, social media can serve as a tool to divide and isolate rather than connect.

Panopticism theory is a social theory rooted in an architectural design for prisons in the mid-nineteenth century called the Panopticon. This design involved a central viewing tower in which guards could always see out, but the prisoners could not see in. Such a design would promote obedience by the mere feeling of being watched all of the time (Galič, Timan, & Koops, 2017). This brings to mind the statement made by Winston: “There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment” (p. 4-5). Being watched all of the time is not necessary for altering one’s behavior—just the perception of being watched (Piro, 2008). Although citizens in the United States have not granted the government authority for constant surveillance, the revelations from Edward Snowden’s whistleblowing revealed the government was and has been using various avenues to engage in extensive surveillance of American citizens, as well as world leaders, without prior knowledge or permission (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2016). While many were outraged at these revelations and violations of civil liberties, others felt Snowden should be prosecuted. Those who fall into the latter category tend to justify the actions of the National Security Agency (NSA) with phrases such as, “If you don’t have anything to hide, you don’t have anything to worry about.” Such attitudes help blur the line of appropriate government



behavior and distract from the necessity to prevent such abuses (Shackford, 2013). Beyond that, widespread social media use and culture has resulted in a situation where individuals share more information.

Another theory to consider is rational choice theory, which is used in many disciplines and assumes “the rational pursuit of self-interest by individual actors” (Repko, Newell, & Szostak, 2012). In a totalitarian government, where so much is controlled, what is rational and in one’s self-interest is skewed. Does rational choice-making in such an environment encourage conformity or deviance? On one hand, a rational choice could be to follow the party line and stay out of trouble. On the other hand, to others, giving up freedom would seem irrational. This is partially relative to one’s knowledge of and experience with freedom, of course, which is why the transition to a totalitarian government either occurs through subtle changes (i.e., backsliding) or dramatic revolutions with mass casualties to weed out the nonconformers, as was the case in *1984*. In the United States, the polarization of parties and “echo chambers” may skew individual decision-making and may promote more conformity or allegiance to extreme viewpoints.

Synthesis

Is a totalitarian government possible or likely in the United States? Taking all the theories from political science, history, psychology, and sociology together and applying them to this question results in the following conclusion: History has shown that the creation of a totalitarian government through fear and torture is possible. Other disciplines have shown that it seems possible through less direct routes as well: democratic backsliding, subtle changes encouraged by cycles of government structures, the power of the economic elite, candidate-centered campaigns, patriotism debates, and willingness to give up civil rights in the name of convenience and security. While the Democrats and Republicans trade power in elections, preventing either from establishing complete authority, the country’s elite still play a powerful role. While life may seem normal and free, this freedom may be an illusion.

Rewriting History and Controlling Information

A key control variable in *1984* was the ability of the party to control information, access to information, and education, as well as to alter history and individual memory. This was perfectly captured in the following quote: “Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past” (Orwell, 1949, p. 35). Is this possible, in general, and is there evidence of this occurring in the United States? To answer this question, the disciplines most relevant are political science, neuroscience, psychology, and linguistics/communication.

Political Science

The ability to rewrite history relies heavily on the ability to control information in society. Agenda setting and gatekeeping are mechanisms used to control what information is discussed and shared in society. Typically, agenda setting is considered a government



function, while gatekeeping is associated with the media (Barbour & Wright, 2015). However, it is often the government (or those that influence and control government) that uses both of these mechanisms first, and the media respond to its choices (Barbour & Wright, 2015). The control of information provides the opportunity to both frame reality and rewrite history, when desired. Framing history from the perspective of those in power has always been an occurrence; any textbook from the twentieth century could be evidence of that. Most recently, the efforts of the Koch brothers have gained attention. Preying off the meager budgets of public schools, they have offered their free lesson plans about American history that have been referred to as “whitewashed versions” (Harriot, 2018). Winston Churchill is often credited for the quote, “History is written by the victors.” This seems to be true. However, these criticisms are relative to a democratic lens. In a totalitarian system of government, the government controls everything. Therefore, if there are mechanisms for inappropriate influence and control present in the democratic structure, it is easy to see that a totalitarian government could alter and control history.

Another factor to consider is the variety of news sources available. Some may argue that the diversity of news sources makes control of all sources difficult. However, as media control becomes more concentrated, there is more an illusion of choice than actual choice (Barbour & Wright, 2015). This may be more dangerous, as it may be easier to alter public opinion when there is an illusion of choice (Lazaroiu, 2010). In addition, it is important to consider the politics of perception. While politicians and media outlets typically maintain a love-hate relationship, the tension in this relationship does not, in itself, jeopardize the credibility of news sources. However, when those in power aggressively seek to discredit news sources, the validity of news sources is vulnerable. In a democratic society, this is problematic, because the media provide an important check on government that is not provided by any other institution (Emanuelson, 2018). Without the public’s trust to provide this service, those in power feel they have the green light to engage in whatever actions and behaviors they want (Ingle, 2007). While the challenge of “fake news” is not new in the country’s history, the role of the Internet has also amplified the problem (Emanuelson, 2018). According to yearly Gallup polls, Americans’ trust in media has been decreasing since 1972, with the lowest levels of trust among Republicans and those aged 18-49 (Swift, 2016).

Both the government and the media exercise control over information in society. In addition, since net neutrality rules have expired and continue to be debated, private Internet companies also have a gatekeeping role. With the ability to treat content differently, companies can control information that is accessible to the general population (Lobato, 2017). Since most people get their news through the internet or TV provided by internet service providers, this is a considerable amount of potential power.

Public education is the foundation of public knowledge in the United States. In totalitarian societies, education is controlled and limited to facilitate control of the masses. In the United States, where education is viewed by many as a right, providing equal access to quality, unbiased education at all levels has been a struggle, and it continues to be (Gamoran, 2001). Not only are there challenges related to the curriculum choices as described above, but



primary and secondary schools vastly differ in quality of educational and teaching resources. According to Gamoran (2001), who used trends to forecast education inequality for the next century, this will continue.

Although there may be uneven access to quality education, something that most public schools in the United States have in common is the promotion of patriotism and conformity (Belonsky, 2017; Piro, 2008). The most notable example of this is the daily pledge of allegiance public school children engage in at the start of the school day, a tradition that many have questioned over time. A similar practice can be seen in North Korea, where students recite an “oath of allegiance” in the admission ceremony to the Children’s Union at age 10 (Tertitskiy, 2015).

In addition, higher education plays a role. Central to this is the debate over whether higher education should be viewed as a private or public good (Williams, 2016; Staley & Trinkle, 2011). As evidenced by shrinking government support for education at all levels, overall support for education has decreased over time (Sav, 2012). This has driven up the student loan market, currently at \$1.5 trillion (Frotman, 2018). There has also been a constant and steady push toward teaching students at all levels job skills, with a heightened emphasis on STEM subjects (Zakaria, 2015). At the same time, the focus has turned away from the liberal arts (Zakaria, 2015a). A society full of workers with specialized skills but without more broad and flexible knowledge will be limited in their ability to question and check government power. Such a trend very easily contributes to power structure changes within a country. While such shifts are not the same as the extreme nature of the uneducated “proles” compared to the inner party elite in 1984, it is a step in that direction. As education becomes less public and more private, it is easier to imagine a progression towards the social stratification presented in 1984.

Privacy restraint is another form of information control. In totalitarian governments, citizens are extremely limited in their privacy. In the *Constitution of the United States* and its corresponding 27 amendments, citizens are given certain rights. However, some things citizens take for granted are not even specifically mentioned, rather implied through interpretation. This includes privacy, which is not specifically guaranteed in the *U.S. Constitution*. When the *U.S. Constitution* is used to defend the right to privacy, the 5th Amendment and 9th Amendments are usually used to maintain such a right. However, the nature and definition of privacy has changed over time, mostly due to technology (Lukacs, 2016). Not only do citizens in the United States voluntarily share more information with the world through various social media platforms, but they also additionally give permission to companies to use their information, usually without reading the bylaws or policies (Sarapin, Morris, & Vo, 2017). As mentioned above, data can be used to manipulate more than just commercial behavior, if even that should be acceptable.

The range and use of smart devices have increased convenience. However, the ability of such devices to capture personal information raises privacy concerns (Arias, 2014). Regardless, it is likely that many will continue to trade privacy for convenience. In addition, citizens often



trade privacy for security and consider this a reasonable trade-off. In 1984, Oceania was constantly at war with one of the other two main countries. This helped to encourage support for the government, for reduced rations, and for extreme allegiance demands. In the U.S., privacy trade-offs for security include airport security measures, clear backpack and bag requirements at public schools and large stadiums, and security screenings, in general. The acceptance of such policies is driven by the fear of mass shootings and repetition of September 11th-style events. However, the continued legitimization of such trade-offs may help erode the foundational character of these civil rights and liberties.

Neuroscience

Discussions of history and its alterability naturally involve discussions of how the brain forms and recalls memories. Is it possible to change someone's memory about the past? The best area to look for answers to this question is neuroscience. Neuroscience is an interdisciplinary science that involves the study of the nervous system, including memory and stress (Georgetown University Medical Center, n.d.).

While many think of memory as a fixed and stable phenomenon, studies and research have disproven this theory (Roberts, 2002). From a technical standpoint, the hippocampus is the part of the brain related to memory. In the hippocampus, there are two different circuits for memory storage and recall. The existence of two makes it easier to make changes or alterations to a memory in the recall process (Trafton, 2017). This relates to the reconsolidation hypothesis, which asserts that memory is a "recreative process," meaning memories are rewritten in the recall process (Neil, 2017, p. 32).

In addition, studies with children have shown that memory recall can be "manipulated easily" (Zitnikova & Lacinova, 2017, p. 1) with misinformation and even mere suggestions. However, whether or not a memory can be completely erased or planted is a different story. In an experimental study of children of two different ages, Pezdek & Roe (1997) found that memory alteration was possible, but not planting or erasing a memory entirely. This may help explain why children in the book and in totalitarian regimes in history have been able to be manipulated into turning in their own parents.

According to Neil (2011), new memories are the most vulnerable to manipulation, especially if they are disrupted in the process of transitioning from short to long-term memory. However, memories that are central to identity, such as those related to people and relationships, are the most difficult to disrupt and are the least likely to ever be vulnerable to erasure, no matter how science advances in this area (Neil, 2011). In 1984, people who were "vaporized" were removed from all records and public discourse. However, Winston remembered his mother and sister even though they were vaporized, showing that, even in the fictional world of Oceania under totalitarianism, complete memory alteration and erasure was recognized as impossible.



Another variable to consider when analyzing memory is stress. According to a study by Roberts (2002), stress makes individuals more vulnerable to memory manipulation and false memories. Given this information, it is natural to assume that citizens of a totalitarian government, who likely experience more stress than other types of governments, are more vulnerable to memory manipulation. However, stress also affects memory in another way. As mentioned by Dr. Christine Blasey Ford in her testimony at Brett Kavanaugh's hearing, during stressful situations, the body releases epinephrine, which makes an individual's mind lock in on the most salient pieces of information and prioritizes it as important, even though other details may be left forgotten. Her testimony and the information presented has been analyzed and supported by other experts (Ducharme, 2018).

If individuals under stress are more vulnerable to memory manipulation, and stress also causes individuals to lock in on key pieces of information during stressful episodes, it would seem that the ability to manipulate memory through induced stress (e.g., fear of imprisonment or torture) would be very effective. In 1984, there was additionally the perceived perpetual state of war, which would add to citizen stress levels. This would also increase opportunities for memory manipulation.

Do United States citizens have stress levels that make them more susceptible to memory manipulation? According to the American Psychological Association's survey from 2022, 27 percent of Americans are so stressed they cannot function. Significant stressors were inflation and the current political and racial climate. In addition, the future of the nation ranked as a significant stressor for 76 percent of Americans (American Psychological Association, 2022). These stressors were consistent across all demographic groups.

One final aspect of importance in memory creation is repetition. Winston points out that a lie becomes true in this book when it is repeated. Research supports this assertion. Not only is it the case that repeating false information can make it seem true, but it can alter one's ability to monitor source errors (Polage, 2012). Repetition can therefore be a powerful tool for revising history and reality by governments. In the United States, the phrase "fake news" has become popular over the last several years. This has implications for society's construction of the truth and history. If news sources are discredited, their power to check government leader rhetoric is reduced, and government leader rhetoric becomes associated with the truth, especially the more it is repeated. In this way, the news perpetuates even the false news by continuing to replay clips of former President Trump and other government leaders presenting false information.

Psychology

Causing someone to doubt his/her own sanity is one way to provide access to manipulating their construction of the truth and reality. In psychology, this is called gaslighting (Boulanger & Thomas, 2017). When gaslighting occurs, someone has been manipulated to believe that he or she is going crazy and therefore should not trust his or her own thoughts or feelings, creating dependence on another individual. This can be accomplished through withholding



information, giving false information, or constantly questioning another's claims. In *1984*, O'Brien gaslights Winston during his torture sessions, creating extreme vulnerability and dependence on Winston. However, Winston's struggle with discerning reality (between what the party was presenting and what he knew/remembered) already had him debating his sanity, even before there was torture involved.

As mentioned before, identity is strongly linked to memory, and memories that are most strongly tied to identity are the hardest to adapt. These include those related to special experiences and people, relationships. Through minimizing emotional expression and human connection, the government in *1984* was able to effectively minimize the ability of individuals to form a solid sense of identity. Without personal identity or worth, it is easier to control a person. As O'Brien mentions during a torture session, "You do not exist" (Orwell, 1949, p. 268). Although some may argue that technology has facilitated connections between people, there is a growing body of research providing evidence to the contrary (Urquhart, Diaz Andrade, & Borrero Sanchez, 2013; German & Lally, 2007). Depending on the way one uses social media, it can be contributing to feelings of isolation versus feelings of connection (Ludden, 2018). Feelings of isolation can make it easier for manipulation and dependence to take place.

While businesses have always used the information they have to sell items to the public, the nature of this has changed given data availability and enhanced analysis techniques and tools. This has given those with data the ability to design manipulation strategies that are increasingly effective at provoking the desired response (Acquisti, 2014). While commercial manipulation is somewhat expected and condoned in a capitalist, market-market-driven democracy, the use of data for other means has not been. With the right data, manipulation is easier. Although some countries are paving the way to decrease undesirable activities (e.g., GDPR in the EU), the U.S. federal government has not been as open to these types of regulations. Therefore, the citizens of the U.S. continue to be vulnerable to the use of personal data to manipulate behavior.

Linguistics & Communication

In *1984*, Ingsoc is developing something called Newspeak, the official language of Oceania. Newspeak is supposed to help promote allegiance to the party and its teachings, with the assumption being that language controls thought. It is assumed that by limiting language, certain types of thoughts, especially those that go counter to the party, are even possible, thus posing the question: Does language affect thought, or does thought affect language? The most commonly referenced theory in regard to language and thought is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Although it is a mischaracterization of the work of Sapir, who did not support linguistic determination, it is central to the discussion of the relationship between language and thought (Carnes, 2014). While the research has not supported a deterministic model, the influence of language on thought is supported. For example, when someone has a name from his/her language for various varieties of shades of color, he/she is able to distinguish between



very subtle shade differences in a much more complex way than someone who only has primary colors in his/her native language.

According to Zolyan (2015), totalitarian governments do not seek to create a new language, rather to alter the structure and rules governing existing language. In the book, the language is not changing, the rules around it are. Whether or not this change can prevent individuals from perceiving reality for themselves or remembering language as it was, is up for debate. In the United States, language continues to evolve. From a political standpoint, a whole vocabulary of “politically correct” terms have been developed to replace those deemed “politically incorrect.” While one person may argue that this is not the same as what is happening with Newspeak, that it is simply an attempt to promote civil dialogue and reduce discrimination, another person may argue that it is an attempt to limit the freedom of speech by changing the rules governing it (Zimmermann & Finlay, 2014).

Another aspect of communication is the use of symbols. Symbols are prevalent and widely used to promote certain beliefs in the United States today. The United States flag is one of the most powerful symbols for the country, and it means different things to different people. Over the last few years, there has been a controversy over players in the National Football League (NFL) kneeling during the national anthem. To some, these symbolic acts are unpatriotic, and they accuse those who kneel of being disrespectful to those who serve and have served in the military. On the other side, there are those who defend such acts, asserting that such acts are what the flag stands for. The debate and those on each side is similar to other patriotism debates.

Synthesis

Memory, history, and information are all vulnerable to manipulation, although it is harder when these are tied to identity. In the United States, the reduced access to education, reduction of true privacy protection, deflated credibility of the news, and increased feelings of isolation, creates an environment suitable for manipulation of memory and reality. Also, the illusion of choice in news sources makes citizens vulnerable to information manipulation. While the approach may be different than in *1984* (direct and blatant control versus illusion of freedom), the overall effect is likely to be the same. In *1984*, information was controlled and altered by government. Today, government and information are controlled and altered by private interests with the illusion of choice. In *1984*, individuals were tortured to alter their perception of reality. Currently, data is being used to manipulate individuals. In both situations, gaslighting has been and is used.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings from this interdisciplinary analysis on the predictive qualities of George Orwell’s *1984* seem to indicate that he was wrong about the way and the time, but he was possibly right about the ultimate outcome. The main difference is the direct nature of control in *1984* versus the illusion of choice in current society. Mechanisms to control information,



language, privacy, and relationships are available and have already begun to be exploited. Another key difference is that there has not been a global triggering event to hasten transition to a totalitarian government, but rather, a series of somewhat smaller changes and movements over time that make acknowledgement of such more difficult to notice. These changes include the *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision, which paved the way for powerful corporations to exhibit even more influence over elections and government (Smith, 2011). In addition, over time, campaigns have become more candidate-centered, especially with social media, which has made those elected feel more emboldened to do what they please rather than remain in line with party preferences (Johnson, 2005).

One element of the United States that may be the saving grace against totalitarianism is the two-party system. Although elites are controlling both parties, the existence of two parties that are ideologically opposed, may be the saving grace of the current form of government, assuming the power continues to be shared between them. For parties to keep the country on course, however, they will have work against their decline, which has been facilitated by the rise of interest group power, political action committees, and candidate-centered campaigns (Everson, 1982).

Another important consideration is the importance of innovation. Without innovation, a country cannot maintain its place as a world power. However, “science and innovation require freedom...freedom to create, to understand, and to challenge” (Chapas, 2005, p. 12). Therefore, if the United States wants to maintain its place in the world, it has to maintain an environment that is conducive to continued innovation. Is it too late to do this? No, it is not. There is still hope that leaders will make changes necessary to safeguard what is fundamental about the country. Will they? We will have to wait and see.

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