

George Orwell Knew We'd Buy the Screens That Are Used Against Us

Sales of George Orwell's utopian novel *1984* (1949) have spiked twice recently, both times in response to political events. In early 2017, the idea of 'alternative facts' called to mind Winston Smith, the book's protagonist and, as a clerk in the Ministry of Truth, a professional alternator of facts. And in 2013, the US National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden compared widespread government surveillance explicitly to what Orwell had imagined: 'The types of collection in the book – microphones and video cameras, TVs that watch us – are nothing compared to what we have available today.'

Snowden was right. Re-reading *1984* in 2018, one is struck by the 'TVs that watch us', which Orwell called telescreens. The telescreen is one of the first objects we encounter: 'The instrument (the telescreen, it was called) could be dimmed, but there was no way of shutting it off completely.' It is omnipresent, in every private room and public space, right up until the end of the book, when it is 'still pouring forth its tale of prisoners and booty and slaughter' even after Smith has resigned himself to its rule.

What's most striking about the telescreen's ubiquity is how right *and* how wrong Orwell was about our technological present. Screens are not just a part of life today: they *are* our lives. We interact digitally so often and in such depth that it's hard for many of us to imagine (or remember) what life used to be like. And now, all that interaction is recorded. Snowden was not the first to point out how far smartphones and social media are from what Orwell imagined. He couldn't have known how eager we'd be to shrink down our telescreens and carry them with us everywhere we go, or how

readily we'd sign over the data we produce to companies that fuel our need to connect. We are at once surrounded by telescreens and so far past them that Orwell couldn't have seen our world coming.

Or could he? Orwell gives us a couple of clues about where telescreens came from, clues that point toward a surprising origin for the totalitarian state that *1984* describes. Taking them seriously means looking toward the corporate world rather than to our current governments as the likely source of freedom's demise. If Orwell was right, consumer choice – indeed, the ideology of choice itself – might be how the erosion of choice really starts.

The first clue comes in the form of a technological absence. For the first time, Winston finds himself in a room without a telescreen:

'There's no telescreen!' he could not help murmuring.

'Ah,' said the old man, 'I never had one of those things. Too expensive. And I never seemed to feel the need of it, somehow.'

Though we learn to take the old man's statements with a grain of salt, it seems that – at some point, for some people – the owning of a telescreen was a matter of choice.

The second hint is dropped in a book within the book: a banned history of the rise of 'the Party' authored by one of its early architects who has since become 'the Enemy of the People'. The book credits technology with the destruction of privacy, and here we catch a glimpse of the world in which we live: 'With the development of television, and the technical advance which made it possible to receive and transmit simultaneously on the same instrument, private life came to an end.'

What does the murky history of the telescreen tell us about

the way we live now? The hints about an old man's reluctance and television's power suggest that totalitarian overreach might not start at the top – at least, not in the sense we often imagine. Unfettered access to our inner lives begins as a choice, a decision to sign up for a product because we 'feel the need of it'. When acting on our desires in the marketplace means signing over our data to corporate entities, the erosion of choice is revealed to be the *consequence* of choice – or at least, the consequence of celebrating choice.

Two historians have recently been pointing toward this conclusion – in quite different ways.


One, Sarah Igo at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, has [argued](#) that Americans' demands for privacy seem to have gone hand-in-hand with their decisions to sacrifice it over the course of the 20th century. Citizens simultaneously shielded and broadcast their private lives through surveys and social media, gradually coming to accept that modern life means contributing to – and reaping the rewards of – the data on which we all increasingly depend. Though some of these activities were 'chosen' more readily than others, Igo shows how choice itself came to seem beside the point when it came to personal data.

Meanwhile, the historian Sophia Rosenfeld at the University of Pennsylvania has argued that freedom itself was reduced to choice, specifically choice between a limited set of options, and that its reduction has marked a revolution in politics and thought. As options are winnowed to those we can find online – a winnowing conducted under the banner of 'choice' – we start to feel the consequences of this shift in our own lives.

One can easily imagine choosing to buy a telescreen – indeed, many of us already have. And one can also imagine *needing* one, or finding them so convenient that they feel compulsory. The big step is when convenience becomes compulsory: when we can't file our taxes, complete the census or contest a claim without

a telescreen.

As a wise man once put it: 'Who said "the customer is always right?" The seller – never anyone but the seller.' When companies stoke our impulse to connect and harvest the resulting data, we're not surprised. When the same companies are treated as public utilities, working side-by-side with governments *to connect us* – that's when we should be surprised, or at least wary. Until now, the choice to use Gmail or Facebook has felt like just that: a choice. But the point when choice becomes compulsion can be a hard one to spot.

When you need to have a credit card to buy a coffee or use an app to file a complaint, we hardly notice. But when a smartphone is essential for migrant workers, or when filling out the census requires going online, we've turned a corner. With the US Census set to go online in 2020 and questions about how all that data will be collected, stored and analysed still up in the air, we might be closer to that corner than we thought. 

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