

Florida Southern College

The Reality of Dystopia in Politics and Media:

A Critical Examination of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *V for Vendetta*

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In 1949, George Orwell published his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a story of a dark, dystopian future. In the wake of World War II, the future seemed bleak to many people, including those in Western democratic societies. While Orwell's vision never came to pass, his work remains popular with audiences, even impacting society to the point of adding vocabulary. In 1953, Ray Bradbury released *Fahrenheit 451*, illustrating his own ideas of complete censorship and giving readers a supposedly "cautionary tale" on the problems of government-imposed societal limitations. Now, websites that are forced for legal reasons to block resources return a status code of "451." Thirty years after *Fahrenheit 451*, Alan Moore and David Lloyd published *V for Vendetta*, a graphic novel depicting a totalitarian regime, taking both real and fictional symbols to craft its dystopian setting. Often seen as a symbol of resistance against governmental oppression, the Guy Fawkes mask used in the story has become popular among anarchist groups. All three texts have retained popularity and remain on all-time bestseller lists, and their impacts on modern society are undeniable. However, with such dark messages, the question of why these works are popular still stands.

While this genre has become a permanent fixture in popular culture through young adult (YA) novels and films, its major works have sustained prominence, both in commercial success and cultural impact. The texts *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *V for Vendetta* illustrate dystopian futures where censorship is dictated by the government and mass media is manipulated for political purposes. The direction of Western, capitalist governments—particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom—has begun to worry certain legal intellectuals, who fear that dystopian characteristics are being normalized. Indeed, the popularity of dystopian fiction in recent years may suggest that Western readers have grown desensitized to many ideas that were once branded totalitarian. The deterioration of language and increased

government censorship and surveillance are not unlike those seen in dystopian fiction. Its definition as fiction shows it is imaginary, yet people still feel fear. Possibly, this could be because the value of literature does not inherently come from plot; rather, it comes from themes and the story's ability to explain something tangible. As YA author Lauren DeStefano described it, "Most dystopian [literature], classic and contemporary, paints a future world that puts a twist on present society—a future world that could plausibly happen" (MTV News Staff, "Wither"). Dystopian literature tells a story, but there is always an element of truth in the foundation of the narrative. While people continue to reference certain dystopian texts when discussing these problems, their allusions do not lead to action or any preventative measures. Furthermore, the increased interest in—but lack of action towards—the topic suggests that society focuses on dystopian texts, specifically those listed here, in order to subconsciously prepare for such a future.

Many people use the terms *dystopian* and *post-apocalyptic* interchangeably; however, dystopian fiction and post-apocalyptic fiction are distinctly different subgenres. Dystopian works typically consist of "man versus society" stories. Post-apocalyptic works tend to depict "man versus nature" stories. Thus, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *V for Vendetta* are best described as dystopian works.

Original dystopian literature could hypothetically be traced back as far as the eighteenth century, with Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. While Swift claimed his intent with the book was to "vex the world, rather than divert it," it came to be known more for its insights into the politics of the real world than its fictitious elements (25). Later works depicted possible dismal futures for the world, but most seemed too far off to elicit readers' serious concern. The subgenre focuses on futuristic societies which usually arise from either environmental degradation or

totalitarianism. These societies typically have common traits like oppressive governments, extreme censorship, highly developed technology, and a loss of personal privacy. Most of these societies grow from the ambition to build a better world; however, those in power are unethical, and at least one member of society has become disaffected. Indeed, as American author Ursula K. Le Guin notes in her 2017 essay collection, *No Time to Spare*, “Every utopia since *Utopia* has also been, clearly or obscurely, actually or possibly, in the author’s or in the reader’s judgement, both a good place and a bad one. Every utopia contains a dystopia, every dystopia contains a utopia” (85). No society exists in which all people are equally content, as one extreme tends to require the opposite for balance. The quest for a perfect world, at least in fiction, always goes further to create an oppressive situation for some portion of society.

While utopias usually begin as such, dystopias often began with the intent of creating a utopia. In the essay “Disaffected from Utopia,” scholar L. E. Hough suggests that attempts to create a utopia will always result in a dystopia, stating, “When there is nowhere to go, perfection would so limit people that destruction in terms of ‘the bad place’ would ensue” (118). For this reason, critics have argued that dystopian literature could be seen as cautioning against the idea of utopias. And since many dystopian authors base stories upon current events—e.g., “the fabric and living conditions of London in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are a direct response to London during and immediately after [World War I]”—their readers usually identify certain cautionary aspects, such as social oppression (Philips 70).

Assuming that dystopian literature does seek to warn readers of possible oppressive attributes, the genre arguably fails in its purpose. Every day, governments in the Western world are criticized for being repressive, for censoring information, and for invading privacy. And with

modern developments, certain prominent ideas have become current realities: deterioration of language, government censorship, manipulation of information, and continual surveillance.

Dystopian literature has warned against all four concepts, but each one has come into existence. It is possible, then, that other dystopian characteristics could come to fruition. The author of the YA dystopian *Divergent* trilogy, Veronica Roth, considered this prospect, stating, “I think it's fascinating to look at a world that an author has created that has sort of stemmed from the world now, and usually dystopian books point out something about our current world and exaggerates a tendency or a belief” (Weiss). However, modern society appears no more concerned about the “Hunger Games” being in the future than those in Orwell’s time were concerned about the possibility of 24-hour surveillance.

The societies depicted in dystopian texts seem unlikely to Western audiences: they are ruled by a tyrannical government that seems normal to its citizens, but one character notices the problem (which its readers find so obvious). In real life, society may lack concern because power does not appear centralized in one authority. It is held by multiple figures, including government officials, big tech, mass media and private entities; our “Big Brother” is a bit more diffuse.

The deterioration of language, according to Orwell’s essay, “Politics and the English Language,” happens alongside the decline of society. The shortening of words, as exhibited by today’s “textspeak,” limits our capability for precise and direct thought, forcing individuals to assimilate in order to communicate, thereby increasing the potential for Orwellian “groupthink.” Additionally, the increased use of pretentious language, frequently exhibited by politicians and others in authority, makes it more difficult for audiences to fully understand the content. New concerns for “politically correct language,” when pushed to extremes, also limit the thought of modern-day society and create “groupthink” because “[w]hile we don’t think entirely in words,

language does help give form and expression to complex ideas within us” (Green, *Part 1*). While proponents of such limitations profess that the elimination of words in this context is done for the greater good of all people, and that the elimination of some derogatory words and “hate speech” serve moral purposes, the continued filtration of language is a typical dystopian characteristic.

In Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Oceania is ruled over by “the Party,” named Ingsoc, which follows the ideology of English socialism. As a one-party system, in true totalitarian fashion, the Party imposes their ideology “by co-opting not just the institutions of government but also social structures (clubs, social organizations, the church, etc.), turning them into extensions of the state” (Atchison and Shames 33). The leader of the Party is personified in the character of “Big Brother,” an all-knowing and all-powerful figurehead and symbol for the people of Oceania.

Ingsoc uses language elimination—proscribing unnecessary words to clarify motivation in speech. However, by limiting language, the Party limits society’s understanding of its own motivations and thoughts. Early in the text, Syme, a Newspeak specialist, explains:

Don’t you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it. Every concept that can ever be needed will be expressed by exactly one word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its subsidiary meanings rubbed out and forgotten. (Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 52)

Since one word can become an umbrella term with myriad denotations and connotations, these limitations restrict what society can actually think and understand. The Party advocates for this, as it hides specific meaning, and therefore, helps prevent hurtful speech toward others; essentially, “Newspeak” functions as the linguistic form of brainwashing.

In *V for Vendetta*, meaning in words alters over time. Under a totalitarian government that runs virtually every part of everyday life via various agencies, the administration determines exactly how words are to be interpreted. Most of the people in London eventually forget the original meanings over time, becoming completely subservient to their “superiors.” However, one character recalls the changes, and in the film version she states:

I remember how the meaning of words began to change. How unfamiliar words like "collateral" and "rendition" became frightening, while things like Norsefire and the Articles of Allegiance became powerful. I remember how "different" became dangerous. I still don't understand it, why they hate us so much. (*V for Vendetta*)

The geopolitical world in the story has crumbled; rising from its ashes is a new political nationalism that promises security and safety.

The language of current society has arguably begun to deteriorate; many word choices from the last century have been forced into obsolescence. This is not to say that all language elimination is done unnecessarily; on the contrary, many words are eliminated with the goal of advancing social safety. However, these well-intentioned eliminations create the potential for more cuts, leading to some needless eliminations, which remain unopposed and unquestioned because the line between necessary and unnecessary is virtually unidentifiable. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the government “spends most of its time framing official government and press statements to say the ‘right’ things in the ‘right’ language” (Atchison and Shames 10). The language a society chooses to use has power, determining what that society views as “right.” Therefore, even when it is done to help society be kinder, language elimination is a form of censorship.

The censoring of information is especially prominent in Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. In the novel, the government's censorship of media prevents society from knowing truth and from gaining knowledge. As with the deterioration of language, this leads to an inability to articulate precise thoughts. When those in power remove society's access to knowledge, they inhibit society's independent thinking, which creates dependence on them for information. In an article for the *New York Times*, filmmaker Ramin Bahrani, who created the 2018 HBO adaptation of *Fahrenheit 451*, notes several real-world examples:

Bradbury was worried about the advent of Reader's Digest. Today we have Wikipedia and tweets. He worried that people would read only headlines. Today it seems that half the words online have been replaced with emojis. The more we erode language, the more we erode complex thought and the easier we are to control. Bradbury feared memory loss. Today we have designated Google and our social-media accounts as the guardians of our memories, emotions, dreams and facts. As tech companies consolidate power, imagine how easy it could be to rewrite Benjamin Franklin's Wiki entry to match what the firemen in Bradbury's novel learn about the history of the fire department: "Established, 1790, to burn English-influenced books in the Colonies. First Fireman: Benjamin Franklin." In his way, Bradbury predicted the rise of "alternative facts" and an era of "post-truth." (Bahrani)

Thus, while the US Constitution provides for freedom of speech and freedom of the press in the First Amendment, both freedoms have begun to disintegrate, forming a closed discussion forum. With such aspects as "bias by omission" and self-censorship for the sake of groupthink, the press has become more difficult for the public to trust.

The government in *Fahrenheit 451* also censors the materials with which people can educate themselves. An entire occupation is adjusted to enforce this task: "[firemen] were given

a new job, as custodians of our peace of mind, the focus of our understandable and rightful dread of being inferior; official censors, judges, and executors” (Bradbury 56). The firemen have been indoctrinated to believe that Benjamin Franklin founded the first fire station to light fires. As history is retained digitally and has been manipulated by the government, the only information the society receives is from the media, so they do not question the “recorded history.” By prohibiting books, the government removes access to history, making it impossible for society to understand the past, and therefore, the present. The chief of the firemen, Beatty, explains this mindset, stating, “If you don’t want a house built, hide the nails and wood. If you don’t want a man unhappy politically, don’t give him two sides to a question to worry him; give him one. Better yet, give him none” (Bradbury 58). This lack of information forces people to depend on the government to think and make decisions.

In modern-day society, another form of censorship has arisen: censorship of and on social media. Various sources have community guidelines meant to keep sensitive material out of the hands of less mature viewers. However, enforcing these guidelines typically comes through flagging from other users, leading to the placement of material under review. The magnitude of these numbers makes it likely some posts are not actually reviewed; they are simply removed from consumption, therefore leading to what some, such as Arkansas attorney general Leslie Rutledge, would argue is “unfair censorship.”

In response, some private companies, such as Facebook and YouTube, have explained that, as businesses and not government organizations, they are subject to different requirements and therefore not held to the same standards; in this view, censorship is not the problem. As private companies, these groups, as of now, are outside the realm of government censorship. However, one might argue that, as many governmental groups in dystopian literature would be

privately-owned in the modern world, the removal of information on these forums should be addressed now and lawmakers should develop policies to prevent escalation. In 2019, a *Forbes* article compared *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to the current societal landscape, stating:

In 1984, it was the state that conducted surveillance and censored speech. In 2019, social media companies deploy vast armies of human and algorithmic moderators that surveil their users 24/7, flagging those that commit thoughtcrimes and deleting their violations from existence. Those that commit too many thoughtcrimes are banished to “unperson” status by these same private companies, without any intervention or even in contradiction with the will of the state and without any right to appeal. (Leetaru)

In the eyes of the author Kaley Leetaru, who is a Senior Fellow at the George Washington University Center for Cyber & Homeland Security, social media companies have risen above any possible totalitarian government in terms of suppression and influence. This view has led to certain social media accounts, particularly those of government officials, being designated at times as “public forums,” making them potentially subject to First Amendment protections.

Regardless of these arguments, a 2020 Pew Research Study found that over 70% of American adults believe politically charged content on social media is “censored” (Vogels, Perrin, & Anderson). Whether the information is removed intentionally or unintentionally, the constant elimination of information is, at least, questionable.

Similar to those in the other texts, the society in *V for Vendetta* is controlled through the censorship of information, but it is more prominent in a different form of media: television. In a nation under a totalitarian government called “Norsefire,” the government is divided into anatomically named agencies, such as “the Eye,” which is visual surveillance, “the Nose,” which is the police department, and “the Fingermen,” which are the secret police. The news and

propaganda section of the government forms “the Mouth,” which controls all media. The title character, V, describes their situation as, “Where once you had the freedom to object, to think and speak as you saw fit, you now have censors and systems of surveillance coercing your conformity and soliciting your submission” (*V for Vendetta*). Television programs are controlled by the government, but all shows are taped in advance in order to remove the possibility of broadcasts against Norsefire.

This dependence is reminiscent of *Fahrenheit 451*, in which Bradbury describes the house as surrounded by flatscreens. At the time of writing, television was still new, and, as University of Massachusetts Amherst professor Daphne Patai suggests, “Bradbury’s early concerns, then, about the potential effects of television were not far-fetched. He was unusually sensitive to the particular allure of the new medium, with its ability to colonize not only viewers’ attention but also their intellects and emotions, as the extraordinarily rapid growth of televisions revealed” (42).

Even in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, “there is a clear allusion to the role of mass media in manipulating public opinion. The cinema is among them, though it is acknowledged that political control has been ensured, above all, by the evolution of television” (Varricchio 103). The invasiveness of the telescreen makes the screen “an instrument to spy on people,” which relegates the entertainment value to secondary importance (Varricchio 104). The telescreen substitutes for many technologies we use in everyday life, such as alarms. This makes society entirely dependent upon the telescreen to function, not unlike modern society’s reliance on mobile phones. *V for Vendetta* takes these concerns to a new extreme, fully engrossing and swaying its citizens.

The society is also overseen by “Fate,” a supercomputer surveillance system. The “Voice of Fate,” Lewis Prothero, speaks daily “information” to the public on behalf of the government in the form of a radio broadcast. Holding the title of “Voice of Fate,” Prothero’s declarations are irrefutable in the eyes of society, removing the possibility of disagreement among the masses. The title character, V, notes that the people gave their rights away, stating, “But who elected them? It was you! You who appointed these people! You who gave them the power to make your decisions for you! . . . You have encouraged these malicious incompetents, who have made your working life a shambles. You have accepted without question their senseless orders” (Moore and Lloyd 116-117). Everything is dictated by Fate, and in this society, the divide between privately and publicly owned companies is virtually nonexistent. By controlling all sources of information, the government controls its citizens’ opinions.

The First Amendment states, in part, “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances” (US Const. amend. I). The amendment only concerns censorship by the government. Still, some, such as Belmont College of Law professor David L. Hudson, Jr., would argue that the amendment should be expanded to prohibit other abridgement of freedom of speech. The US and UK governments do not have official censorship that is comparable to countries like China or Poland. Yet, laws are not the only forms of speech limitation.

Private companies place other regulations upon their own published information, and a large number of media sources are currently privately owned. This ownership causes such groups to regulate themselves. In his 2019 book, *Unfreedom of the Press*, American lawyer and writer Mark Levin suggests that the news industry has begun to self-destruct. He states that rather than

limiting itself because of governmental standards, the press has limited itself with the concept of “objectivity of the press.”

While notably conservative, Levin asserts concepts that can be applied to both political sides, especially the idea that, while the press professes objectivity, most news outlets are obviously biased. He argues that the modern press “serve as societal filters attempting to enforce uniformity of thought and social and political activism” (Levin 2). This ignoring of true nature is hypocritical. As a result of abandoning its original tenants, the press is hurt by:

. . . not government oppression or suppression...but present-day newsrooms and journalists . . . opinion and propaganda passed off as news, the staging of pseudo-events, self-censorship, bias by omission, and outright falsehoods are too often substituted for old-fashioned, objective fact gathering and news reporting. (Levin 1)

Thus, Levin believes that freedom of the press is hurt more by the private companies that presume to promote it than any current US law.

Levin also argues that the press is threatened by the consolidation of outlets and production of information by other companies. While news organizations have always been private companies, he suggests that the new conglomerations could eliminate the idea of independent news reporting. He emphasizes information from *The Elements of Journalism*, which states, “In the new century, one of the most profound questions for a democratic society is whether an independent press survives. The answer will depend on whether journalists have the clarity and conviction to articulate what an independent press means and whether, as citizens, the rest of us care” (Kovach and Rosenstiel 7). Indeed, outside sources like Twitter and Facebook are growing more influential, possibly more so than government.

In all three texts, the media is regulated by the government because “[d]ictators in dystopian fiction know all too well the power of the press” (Atchison and Shames 10). While there are not necessarily laws prohibiting certain speech, the government’s control of all influential outlets would certainly be considered a First Amendment violation. In this situation, the media does not exist as a private company; it is fully public and connected with the government. However, both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *V for Vendetta* are set in the UK, where those citizens technically have a negative right to freedom of expression, though there are a broad range of exceptions. The worlds of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *V for Vendetta* do not grant even that level of protection. The media within those texts essentially censors itself, existing as a state-media.

Even if not necessarily involved in the elimination of “freedom of the press,” regulatory actions grant the government the opportunity to create a form of censorship that is familiar to readers of dystopian literature. That capability for censorship potentially leads to another issue: manipulation of information. Such manipulation can exist in many different forms, making it difficult to identify. However, information alteration is one of the most frequently used forms, and, therefore, one of the most measurable.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the protagonist Winston works in the Ministry of Truth, from which all information is produced. In their society:

Every record has been destroyed or falsified, every book rewritten, every picture has been repainted, every statue and street building has been renamed, every date has been altered. And the process is continuing day by day and minute by minute. History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right. (Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 155)

Winston rewrites government records in order for them to align with “the Party’s” ideological aims:

It is the obliteration of any sort of reliable historical record . . . .While the idea of an objective history is a concept open to debate—histories are interpretations of factual material, not facts in themselves—it is the stifling of historical debate, of contestation over the meanings of the past, which makes this form of thought control ostensibly so effective and provocative. (Phillips 71)

In his work, Winston is trained to understand that “[w]ho controls the past . . . controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past” (Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 34). While the United States has no office in which history is rewritten, “fake news” has become a prominent issue in today’s society. Using what officials have called “alternative facts,” some members of the government have released information that has been altered to their benefit, making it difficult for society to determine what is real and what is false.

In his essay, “Sex, Violence and Concrete: The Post-War Dystopian Vision of London in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,” Regent’s University London professor Lawrence Phillips writes of Orwell’s novel, “While the idea of an objective history is a concept open to debate—histories are interpretations of factual material, not facts in themselves—it is the stifling of historical debate, of contestation over the meanings of the past, which makes this form of thought control ostensibly so effective and provocative” (71). And while Western journalists are often condemned when they are accused of manipulating information to their benefit, the real problem could be interpretations of objectivity. In an interview with Longform, Executive Editor of the *New York Times*, Dean Baquet, said, “No journalistic process is objective . . . because no human being is objective” (Longform). Technically, it will never be possible for even the most objective

journalists to actually have a non-partisan view. In *Unfreedom of the Press*, Levin notes, “The fact that approximately 65 percent of these journalists self-identify as either political independents or other does not necessarily mean they are without a partisan or ideological outlook, which may well motivate or influence their reporting” (20). Essentially, having no set political affiliation does not make a person fully neutral. While the writers may not identify with one major political party, all retain some level of unconscious bias. Being unaware of that level is arguably more dangerous, since those writers may not take steps to combat their biases.

Manipulated information in today’s press has not yet reached the level of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *Fahrenheit 451*, but technology and social media allow “news” to be published every second. And since the majority of the general population is unlikely to fact check, their ability to determine which news is true and which is false is considerably weakened. The rapid growth of mass communication has increased the problem. But it goes as far back as 1947, when the Commission of Freedom of the Press issued a report concluding that freedom of the press was in danger. Considering the phenomenon of the modern press, the Commission wrote:

Its typical unit is the great agency of mass communication . . . Their scope and power are increasing every day as new instruments become available to them. These instruments can spread lies faster and farther than our forefathers dreamed when they enshrined the freedom of the press in the First Amendment of the Constitution. (Hutchins Commission 209)

The speed of communication limits society’s ability to discern the validity of information, leading many people to either give the benefit of the doubt or to regard all news sourced on the internet as false.

Currently, manipulation of information exists in two forms: “fake news,” which can range from altered documentation to blatant lies, and complete suppression of one side of a story.

Interpretive reporting could potentially produce either form, with alteration or removal both deceiving consumers. Former journalist Matthew Pressman expounded upon this issue in his book, *On Press*, explaining, “The move toward interpretation began in the 1950s and continues today, and it has far-reaching implications. It caused journals to redefine objectivity, contributed to the public’s mistrust of the news media, and shifted the balance of power in news organizations from editors to reporters” (23-24). Today, anyone can give their opinion, but in a fast-paced media-based society, this is risky.

In October 2019, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg testified before the US House Financial Services Committee regarding his newly proposed cryptocurrency, Libra. However, during a questioning by Democratic Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the interrogation deviated as she challenged Facebook’s policies and enforcement regarding fact-checking, specifically in terms of political advertisements. In her last five minutes, Ocasio-Cortez asked, “Do you see a potential problem here with a complete lack of fact-checking on political advertisements?” (Holmes). Acknowledging society’s general difficulty in determining truth, the increased possibility of manipulated information could confuse the general population. However, Zuckerberg responded that removing such information could prove profitless, stating, “In most cases, in a democracy, I believe that people should be able to see for themselves what politicians that they may or may not vote for are saying and judge their character for themselves,” (Holmes). Considering these outlooks, censorship and manipulation of information could be considered as competing concerns, yet they exist simultaneously in dystopian literature.

Both sides of the political spectrum express concern with a typical characteristic of dystopian literature; however, their focus is singular. The left hones in on the manipulation of information, while the right worries about censorship. Meanwhile, according to a 2020 study

conducted by the Knight Foundation, “Three in 4 Americans say the spread of misinformation online is ‘a major problem’”; the same study also revealed that there are more Americans who believe the high number of informational sources make credibility more difficult to determine than those who believe the opposite (Jones). Consequently, the credibility of real news has decreased, making manipulation of fact easier. In their book *Survive and Resist: The Definitive Guide to Dystopian Politics*, political science professors Amy L. Atchison and Shauna L. Shames acknowledge, “Once the media is discredited, the people are more dependent on their leaders for information. This, in turn, makes the people easier to control” (Atchison and Shames 84). Heading in this direction, it is not impossible to see how informational manipulation could reach the levels seen in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

In the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, information that was not in the news essentially did not happen. As Winston writes, “The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command” (Orwell 81). Today, media sources on both political sides in the modern Western world entirely ignore stories. In its own way, such omissions and variations can form a modern “manipulation of truth,” if not outright censorship.

Through the manipulation of truth in a dystopian setting, the government gains an opportunity; they can appear to reveal all information without fear of backlash because they are able to hide their true motives, despite appearing candid to the masses. Using this method, the leaders of a society can claim honesty and innocence. They base their “candor” on the purported availability of all information while hiding specific details. The government can then request information from the public under the guise of “transparency.” This idea is emphasized in Orwell’s design, with the statement, “And if all others accepted the lie which the Party imposed—if all records told the same tale—then the lie passed into history and became truth.

‘Who controls the past’ ran the Party slogan, ‘controls the future: who controls the present controls the past’” (*Nineteen Eighty-Four* 34). While the practice of “spinning” stories in a particular way is not a new concept, the complete disregard and denial of entire stories takes the subjectiveness to a propaganda-like level.

Media has at times had a higher level of influence than the government, even appearing to steer governmental actions. In an address by president of the National Council on Public History, Alexandra M. Lord, she wrote:

Self-censorship does the work done elsewhere by government censors. The latter form of censorship is something we do constantly here in the United States and something I see frequently in my own work. If you work for the federal government, you learn pretty early on that the mantra of every federal worker is “how will this play when it hits the front page of the *Washington Post*?” (Lord 18)

With the level of partisan division today, many in the public eye avoid drawing attention to certain problems, therefore keeping information out of the media. The American Press Institute addressed this idea in the article “Understanding Bias”; they cautioned of a bias which:

. . . used to be called “pack journalism.” It has also been called “group think.” It is the story-line that the press corps *en mass* is telling or repeating. A modern term for it is the *master narrative* . . . . These master narratives can become a kind of trap or rut. The journalist picks facts that illustrate a master narrative, or current stereotype, and ignores other facts. (Dean)

In such a situation, journalists determine as a group what constitutes “news”; as the ignored information is not on the news, in the eyes of the public, it essentially did not happen.

Ignoring coverage potentially deprives society of the possibility of attaining information; however, while society does have a right to certain information, this is not to say that any and all information, including personal and digital, should be released. Lack of privacy is a prevalent problem, and increased surveillance in the current era has contributed to the issue. Dystopian literature reveals the prevalence of the problem, as in all three texts, the government has some form of mass surveillance.

Changes in technology afford companies the opportunity for mass surveillance, and many of those mentioned within dystopian literature seem like predecessors to that of modern society. In “Science Fiction Becomes Reality,” cyber security professor Thomas M. Chen addresses the idea that such technology as cell phones, tablets, and earbuds are not dissimilar from such items created in fiction, saying “Science fiction has a history of influencing popular culture and inspiring engineers to turn ideas into reality” (2). Even Steve Jobs admitted to being inspired by science fiction when presenting some of his newer iPhone models (Lebowitz, Akhtar, & Teng). Indeed, Apple’s Air Pods are similar to technology in *Fahrenheit 451*, in which “Ray Bradbury described ‘seashells’—thimble sized radios fitting in the ear for playing tranquil sounds and nature sound[s] in *Fahrenheit 451*” (Chen 2). However, the larger issues arise from technology and surveillance combinations. These inventions dictate multiple dystopian worlds, and “In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell depicted a society with ubiquitous ‘telescreens’ acting as television in one direction and surveillance video in the other” (Chen 3). *Fahrenheit 451* uses a similar technology: “Ray Bradbury imagined a technology that changed television programs to make them appear to speak personally to each viewer” (Chen 3). While neither of these combinations yet exist, the growth of technology makes their eventual fruition more likely.

US video surveillance rules tend to vary by state. The Constitution does not technically grant the right to privacy from videos, leaving regulations to each state's discretion. Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) is allowed in most states, but this is typically limited to public and work settings and includes small exceptions. However, despite these possible invasions of privacy, the US has significantly less invasive measures than other countries; for example, the UK is assumed to be one the most surveilled areas in the world, with a common estimation of more cameras per person than anywhere else.

Despite these varied levels, no countries are known to have constant audio and video on every street within their borders; however, cybersurveillance does fundamentally use such methods. In 2013, Edward Snowden revealed the existence of National Security Agency programs involving global surveillance, disclosing a problem that DC District Court Judge Richard Leon categorized as "almost Orwellian" (*Klayman v. Obama* 49). While a fully-functioning, democratic society requires the preservation of individual rights, people's expectations of privacy have begun to diminish, as they realize they exist in a network of surveillance.

The level of surveillance in today's society is not entirely known. At a different extreme from Orwell's estimation, the reach of outside observation is more difficult to calculate because:

In 1984, ever-present "telescreens" act as both information conveyor and surveillance device and saturate both public and private spaces with cameras and microphones monitored by the government. In 2019, smartphones take on this role, acting as both our window to the digital world and the means through which myriad private companies from data brokers to social media companies themselves surveil our every action. Yet, our world goes far beyond the one imagined by Orwell in which every device

from our watches to our refrigerators, our thermostats to our toasters, are increasingly Internet-connected and streaming a realtime documentary of our lives back to these private surveillance empires. (Leetaru)

Much of modern technology contains some type of camera, such as computers, tablets, and phones. Webcams have been hacked in the past, leading many to become paranoid around their devices. However, while this is a concern, the problems go further. Some technology experts have begun to suspect that cell phones are listening at all times, regardless of use, due to random appearances of advertisements and topics the owners talked about moments previously. In observing this normalization, author Philip K. Dick wrote, “There will come a time when it isn’t ‘They’re spying on me through my phone’ anymore. Eventually, it will be ‘My phone is spying on me!’” (qtd. in Atchison and Shames 63). While this has yet to be proven, if true, it would constitute an invasion of privacy. Technically, the US Constitution does not have an amendment regarding a right to privacy. However, considering the precedent set in multiple Supreme Court cases of the last century, the Constitution implicitly gives US citizens the right to privacy from governmental intrusions via the First, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Amendments. In response to concerns, many states have imposed their own privacy and social-media content laws.

The Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal of 2018 demonstrates the necessity of privacy in social media regulations. This event resulted in leaks and the gathering of data from millions of Facebook users without consent. Zuckerberg eventually testified in front of the US Congress, apologizing for the incident. However, this occurrence illustrated the critical need to reconsider public privacy, especially in regard to social media. While it is not necessarily “surveillance” as that shown in the dystopian texts, data gathering from social media and Internet sources could function in the same form. Unfortunately, legality and ethics do not always work

in tandem. Such data gathering is often technically legal, as users frequently accept the use of cookies and the like without reading fine print, which is not yet subject to national regulation.

With such unpredictable levels of surveillance, some citizens may limit their usage of certain devices in order to avoid the chances of their actions being seen. Being unaware of observation, they choose to behave as if they are always seen. This mindset is illustrated in eighteenth century philosopher Jeremy Bentham's panopticon design, a concept popularized by the works of French philosopher Michel Foucault. According to this concept, a central observation tower is placed in the center of a circular prison. While the guard in the center can technically see all cells, the inmates cannot see inside the central tower; therefore, the prisoners are never aware if they are currently being watched. Foucault explained the general overview of the phenomenon by stating, "Surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action" (201). Theoretically, this unawareness will lead the prisoners to constantly behave in a specific way; they do not know if they are being watched, so they fear discipline and "behave." Atchison and Shames wrote, "People will often behave properly without any additional prompting merely if they think they are being watched" (66). In the same way, modern citizens could potentially begin to "behave" around technology as if they are consistently being observed. Orwell used this concept in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously. Any sound that Winston made, above the level of a very low whisper, would be picked up by it; moreover, so long as he remained within the field of vision which the metal plaque commanded, he could be seen as well as heard. There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. (Orwell 3)

The citizens' fear of being caught and punished causes them to constantly act in the "correct" way.

The Panopticon design explores the relationship between systems of social control and the people within. Essentially, by putting citizens in fear of always being watched, they will consistently accept regulation, and as Foucault explained, "The Panopticon is a marvelous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogeneous effects of power" (202). Thus, if people today fear surveillance from their cell phones, they remain under the control of those surveying figures. In the same way the Panopticon view goes one way, a computer or phone could be watching at any moment, but users never know if they are being watched. Currently, there are no set regulations on this information avenue.

Traffic cameras are a prime example of the Panopticon in action. Twenty-two states have red-light cameras at intersections, and sixteen states have speed cameras at some location ("Automated Enforcement Review"). These cameras are designed with the intention of reducing traffic accidents. However, some states also use dummy cameras. In the *New York City Red Light Camera Program Review 2020 Report*, the Department of Transportation admitted to moving cameras often and using fake ones in the empty spaces (New York Department of Transportation). They claim this is to combat motorists who memorized the location of the cameras. However, this creates a Panopticon-like state. Because drivers believe they are being watched in more places, they "behave," fearing retribution and fines. While this could be argued as a worthy trade, as it potentially reduces accidents, it is still a clear form of conditioning. And in dystopian literature, most governmental actions begin with good intention. However, these well-intentioned trade-offs of freedom for protection remove citizens' rights and always lead society down a slippery slope.

Lately, the use of traffic cameras has become a controversial topic, with six states prohibiting both red-light and speed cameras and more prohibiting one or the other (“Automated Enforcement Review”). The biggest arguments have necessarily involved privacy rights; the majority of court cases have ruled that such cameras are not a privacy violation, and according to *Idris v. City of Chicago*, “no one has a fundamental right to avoid being seen by a camera on a public street” (Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals). While most of these cameras are not constantly recording—with some merely recording actual violations and others taking snapshots on a timer throughout the day—the rapid growth of surveillance cameras in public locations has become worrisome, and it arguably could lead to surveillance in other avenues.

The Fourth Amendment is the closest to discussing the right to privacy outright, but it specifically refers to physical property. Some critics, such as Deputy Director at the Center on Privacy & Technology at Georgetown University Law Laura Moy, have argued that in this day and age, it is logical to amend this to include digital property, since without this right, nothing can stop a totalitarian figure from taking over all life. The Amendment states that:

. . . the rights of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized. (US Const. amend. IV)

At the time of ratification, the Framers had no reason to believe that property would eventually include items less tangible than “papers and effects,” but that has changed with the advent of the computer and digital property. Essentially, “[e]xpectations of privacy change in response to social and technological developments” (Hu 1828-1829). Therefore, it may become necessary for property rights to evolve as our understanding of what constitutes “property” grows. For

example, the copying of digital data could hypothetically be considered a case of “search and seizure”; therefore, it could violate the Fourth Amendment. However, there is no legal precedent for such a case, making it impossible to be firmly defined as a violation. As of now, there is no definite line of defense to prevent the existence of a government-surveillance state, such as the ones displayed in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *V for Vendetta*.

Since social media encourages peer policing, a lack of traditional surveillance is inconsequential. In Margaret Atwood’s 1985 dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, citizens report on one another, creating fear and distrust. This system serves two functions: it removes the likelihood of society joining together and rebelling, and it enforces “groupthink.” Any possible views outside the “norm” could be reported, forcing the citizens to keep any dissenting opinions to themselves. In his popular YouTube series *Crash Course Literature*, author John Green noted, “In our era, for those of us lucky enough to live in democracies, Big Brother is not a totalitarian government, able to alter the consciousness of its citizens through various forms of torture. Instead, Big Brother is each of us. We are watching each other—in the best ways and the worst ways” (*Part 2*). While modern society has not reached this level, fear of backlash does sometimes force people to self-censor, especially on social media. Rather than be an outsider, they attempt to appear identical in thought to their peers.

By creating identical citizens, dystopian governments are striving to effect a “perfect” society. But these societies cannot achieve that “perfection” without the use of many manmade devices. Technology in fiction benefits the government by adding to its ability to control. The citizens in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are supposedly under constant surveillance via telescreen, leading to the maxim, “Big Brother is watching you.” However, there is no tangible proof throughout the text that the characters are technically under constant surveillance. While

they are consistently in a position in which they could be observed, there is little reason to believe they are actually being viewed 24 hours a day, as is the case in parts of modern-day England. However, the uncertainty of knowing if they are being observed leads the residents of Airstrip One to behave constantly as if they are being watched. It is only when they are certain there is no possibility of being seen that the characters act differently; for example, when Julia and Winston meet, they go into a “private” area, away from telescreens and cameras. In their society, “[y]ou had to live—did live, from habit that became instinct—in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every moment scrutinized” (Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 3). Only a full and complete sense of security can free them; the possibility of being seen is enough to force them to “behave.” These surveillance techniques ensure citizens’ unconscious altered behaviors and lead to a society crippled by paranoia.

In her book *Open the Box*, former BBC Two controller Jane Root acknowledges that media “has a role in defining what we think of as natural . . . to map out who we think we are” (19). The level of media saturation we experience every day creates a “mediated culture,” in which the media simultaneously illustrates and invents parts of society. While media exists to inform and entertain, it also has the potential to influence. In their article “Are We Living in a Dystopia?”, the authors noted, “As our country’s Founding Fathers knew quite well, too much power on the part of any one person or group limits the options and autonomy of the masses” (Shames and Atchison). The amount of power and influence that “Big Tech” holds is, perhaps, higher than the government’s, giving the former greater potential to lead modern society into a “dystopian future.”

One of the most problematic factors in dystopian fiction is society’s acceptance of their situation. The majority are unaware of the problems, and “[u]ntil they become conscious they

will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious” (Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 70). The citizens of Oceania do not see themselves as oppressed by the Party; in their perspective, they chose Big Brother freely. This sentiment reflects an idea once endorsed by Joseph Stalin; many quote him as saying, “It is enough that the people know there was an election. The people who cast the votes decide nothing. The people who count the votes decide everything” (qtd. in Atchison and Shames 74). While likely misquoted, he is evidenced as saying something similar in the memoirs of his former secretary, Boris Bazhanov; therefore, the nature of the quotation still stands. As long as the citizens feel a sense of freedom and security, society is unlikely to rebel, even in a state of immense oppression.

In all three texts, the government employs the media to impose certain regulations and actions upon its citizens, resulting in group beliefs and behavior. However, the citizens often interpret these actions as free expression, as it is not typically “required” that they act like the rest of the group. While it may be an unconscious choice, they see it as their own free will. The most prominent example comes from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in which the people participate in a daily Two Minutes Hate, a period of public speech and expression directed against their supposed political enemies. The citizens view this as an illustration of their “freedom” to articulate their own thoughts and opinions. Yet, as the narrative points out:

The horrible thing about the Two Minutes Hate was not that one was obliged to act a part, but that it was impossible to avoid joining in. Within thirty seconds any pretense was always unnecessary. A hideous ecstasy of fear and vindictiveness, a desire to kill, to torture, to smash faces in with a sledge hammer, seemed to flow through the whole group of people like an electric current, turning one even against one's will into a grimacing, screaming lunatic. And yet the rage that one felt was an abstract, undirected emotion which could be

switched from one object to another like the flame of a blowlamp. (Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 14)

While viewed as freedom, it is clearly an exercise in groupthink, forcing the citizens to equally hate and love the same figures. Ironically, one of the most common arguments for removal of certain content is that it contains “hate speech,” which the American Bar Association defines as “speech that offends, threatens, or insults groups, based on race, color, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, or other traits” (Wermiel). However, the Supreme Court has yet to fully agree on a set definition of “hate speech,” and current precedent has determined that there is no Constitutional exception to the First Amendment for such speech alone. This has resulted in a general lack of consensus among citizens toward what should be removed and what should be protected.

Some, such as Northeastern University psychology professor Lisa Feldman Barrett, argue that hate speech by existence tends to incite violence, making it necessary to remove. Yet others, such as Ken White of the *Los Angeles Times*, would argue that such speech is Constitutionally protected and therefore currently cannot be removed. In *Matal v. Tam*, 582 U.S. \_\_\_ (2017), Justice Samuel Alito wrote, “Speech that demeans on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, disability, or any other similar ground is hateful; but the proudest boast of our free speech jurisprudence is that we protect the freedom to express ‘the thought that we hate’” (United States, Supreme Court). According to the Supreme Court, the removal of speech would be comparable to censorship, curbing our “marketplace of ideas.” In his concurring opinion to *Whitney v. California*, 274 U.S. 357 (1927), Justice Louis Brandeis wrote, “If there be time to expose through discussion, the falsehoods and fallacies, to avert the evil by the processes of education, the remedy to be applied is more speech, not enforced silence.” The right to such

discourse is also referenced in an unused preface to Orwell's *Animal Farm*: "If liberty means anything at all it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear" (Orwell, "Telling People"). In order to maintain the "marketplace of ideas" in our society, it is necessary to at least listen to and consider viewpoints in opposition to our own. So-called "perfect" societies in which all people agree are, thus, properly depicted as dystopian, since "[i]t is only in imperfect societies that one must ponder questions" (Hough 121). The ability to think grants the right to disagree; while not always easy, this is true freedom. Although modern Western society could be deemed "imperfect" and even "hateful" at times, citizens still have the freedom to think and choose. It is not truly a choice when there is only one option.

In attempts for "peace," intervention is likely to infringe upon and remove people's rights to choose. Background characters in dystopian fiction seem at peace and "happy," but most readers identify this happiness as superficial as citizens are deprived of choice. Green noted of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, "The problem isn't that citizens are told the opposite of what is true. The real issue is that their experiences have become so limited that they lack the perspective and the language to differentiate between major concepts" (*Part I*). By making the citizens see their world as the only way, the authoritative powers remove any reason for rebellion, thereby preserving the structure under the guise of security.

Big Brother is "loved" by the citizens of Oceania, and this emotion is passed on to the next generations. His position is almost paternal, as he and the Party "'raise' their citizens to share the state's ideology, values, and morals. They mold their citizens the way parents mold children" (Atchison and Shames 24). As future generations will have no memory of other ways, they are likely to accept Ingsoc without question.

In recent years, there has been a rise in “normalization,” broadly. Certain attitudes and types of social conduct that had been denounced have become more socially acceptable, which is not necessarily a problem; for example, with the social-media body-positivity movement, influencers call upon users to “normalize” bodies that are outside the “socially accepted” standard. However, the normalization has grown past physical attributes to include beliefs, ideals, and actions. As normalization grows more radical, older norms and trends become passe. If applied to censorship, language, and surveillance, excessive normalization could turn the Framers’ original design for a democratic republic into a distant memory.

It is impossible to fully determine the reason for dystopian literature’s popularity or the likelihood of such a future in this brief of a study. Certainly, many of the ideas illustrated within past fiction have now come to fruition, portending more will come in the future. However, those factors alone do not designate a “dystopian” future; certain aspects, such as more advanced technology, offer myriad benefits. A combination of factors is necessary to create a fearful future, and in almost all circumstances, they do not simply happen overnight. Most come from a long period of problems, bad decisions, and general societal deterioration.

It may seem counterintuitive, but dystopian literature should give society hope. It is vital for society to acknowledge what led to those real aspects and stay aware of the present situation, making it possible to have some similar characteristics within modern capitalist governments without guaranteeing a dystopian fate. In an interview with MTV, Ally Condie, a contemporary YA dystopian author, said, “The beauty of dystopia is that it lets us vicariously experience future worlds—but we still have the power to change our own” (MTV News Staff, “Matched”). By regarding dystopian fiction as a warning, made valuable because it explains something real, the fiction can remain a cautionary tale, not a prophecy.

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