

We're living '1984' today

By Lewis Beale, Special to CNN

updated 9:22 AM EDT, Sat August 3, 2013

CNN.com

Editor's note: Lewis Beale writes about culture and film for the Los Angeles Times, Newsday and other publications.

(CNN) -- It appears that the police [now have a device that can read license plates](#) and check if a car is unregistered, uninsured or stolen. We already know that the National Security Agency [can dip into your Facebook](#) page and Google searches. And it seems that almost every store we go into these days wants your home phone number and ZIP code as part of any transaction.

So when Edward Snowden -- now cooling his heels in Russia -- revealed [the extent](#) to which the NSA is spying on Americans, collecting data on phone calls we make, it's not as if we should have been surprised. We live in a world that George Orwell predicted in "1984." And that realization has caused sales of the 1949, dystopian novel [to spike](#) dramatically upward recently -- a 9,000% increase at one point on Amazon.com.

Comparisons between Orwell's novel about a tightly controlled totalitarian future ruled by the ubiquitous Big Brother and today are, in fact, quite apt. Here are a few of the most obvious ones.

Telescreens -- in the novel, nearly all public and private places have large TV screens that broadcast government propaganda, news and approved entertainment. But they are also two-way monitors that spy on citizens' private lives. Today websites like Facebook track our likes and dislikes, and governments and private individuals hack into our computers and find out what they want to know. Then there are the ever-present [surveillance cameras](#) that spy on the average person as they go about their daily routine.

The endless war -- In Orwell's book, there's a global war that has been going on seemingly forever, and as the book's hero, Winston Smith, realizes, the enemy keeps changing. One week we're at war with Eastasia and buddies with Eurasia. The next week, it's just the opposite. There seems little to distinguish the two adversaries, and they are used primarily to keep the populace of Oceania, where Smith lives, in a constant state of fear, thereby making dissent unthinkable -- or punishable. Today we have the [so-called war on terror](#), with no end in sight, a generalized societal fear, suspension of certain civil liberties, and an ill-defined enemy who could be anywhere, and anything.

Doublethink -- Orwell's novel defines this as the act of accepting two mutually contradictory beliefs as correct. It was exemplified by some of the key slogans used by the repressive government in the book: War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength. It has also been particularly useful to the activists who have been hard at work introducing legislation regulating abortion clinics. The claim is that these laws are only to protect women's health, but by forcing clinics to close because of stringent regulations, they are effectively shutting women off not only from abortion, but other health services.

Newspeak -- the fictional, stripped down English



Snowden documents: U.S. spied on EU



Bush vs. Obama on surveillance



Police are tracking where you drive



Brok: NSA's spying on EU 'out of control'

language, used to limit free thought. OMG, RU serious? That's so FUBAR. LMAO.

Memory hole -- this is the machine used in the book to alter or disappear incriminating or embarrassing documents. Paper shredders had been invented, but were hardly used when Orwell wrote

his book, and the concept of wiping out a hard drive was years in the future. But the memory hole foretold both technologies.

Anti-Sex League -- this was an organization set up to take the pleasure out of sex, and to make sure that it was a mechanical function used for procreation only. Organizations that promote abstinence-only sex education, or want to ban artificial birth control, are the modern versions of this.

So what's it all mean? In 1984, Winston Smith, after an intense round of "behavior modification" -- read: torture -- learns to love Big Brother, and the harsh world he was born into. Jump forward to today, and it seems we've willingly given up all sorts of freedoms, and much of our right to privacy. Fears of terrorism have a lot to do with this, but dizzying advances in technology, and the ubiquity of social media, play a big part.

There are those who say that if you don't have anything to hide, you have nothing to be afraid of. But the fact is, when a government agency can monitor everyone's phone calls, we have all become suspects. This is one of the most frightening aspects of our modern society. And even more frightening is the fact that we have gone so far down the road, there is probably no turning back. Unless you spend your life in a wilderness cabin, totally off the grid, there is simply no way the government won't have information about you stored away somewhere.

What this means, unfortunately, is that we are all Winston Smith. And Big Brother is the modern surveillance state.

Follow us on Twitter

Join us on

The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Lewis Beale.

