



From the Archives ---

1984: Manipulating Reality in the Information Age

By Blake White

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Man's power over nature is really the power of some men over others with nature as their instrument.

- C. S. Lewis

Who controls the past controls the future;

Who controls the present controls the past.

- O'Brien, From *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell

We live in an age of revolutionary change. Our economy simultaneously booms and busts, physical laws are seen to represent opposing properties of matter and energy, our values change as often and as swiftly as our immediate gratifications, and the knowledge of our world increases exponentially. Such changes require dynamic minds -those to which change is normal, complacency abnormal, and learning is infinite. Indeed our biggest challenge is not in merely learning facts; it is in learning how to learn so we may quickly adapt to the facts before us.

This adaptation to exponentially changing knowledge is key to our societal progress, yet presents dangers of a new form of slavery: that of a chained mind. As we learn to adapt to incessant change our natural compensation is one of no longer basing our actions and beliefs upon individual first-hand experience, rather, our attitudes and deeds are, to a large extent, determined by the facts presented to us. What we are told is what we believe.

On the surface this seems only a trivial matter but when we take that insightful second look we see the full extent to which we are mentally vulnerable. After all, the world is too complicated for each of us to analyze the barrage of information on the dozens of television channels, in the thousands of newspapers and magazines, and in the millions of books. This being the case, we delegate our thought to experts and broadcasters. We trust their opinions and their honesty. Despite their overt ties to business interests not necessarily aligned with our own, we continue to formulate opinions and strategies based upon

our trust of the media. It is this blind trust that makes us vulnerable to manipulation. Uncritical thought is our new chain, the mass media and high technology's isolationist, paperless, faceless interactions our new overseers and the globally present power structure is our master.

Dependency upon the media and databanks for information is, in itself, not an indictment of those sources. It is the degree to which their potential misuse can distort our view of reality that is so frightening. When we consider the vastness of the audience, the impact of visual imagery, the dependence upon sole agencies (or collaborative entities that present the same view), the movement toward standardized language, and the potential not only for mass distribution of persuasive propaganda but the ability of the power structure to enforce behavior consistent with their propaganda, it becomes clear that an unenlightened citizenry walks "zombie like" into mental slavery when it avoids this issue.

Not only have we been warned of this imminent danger by political activists over the past three decades, but almost forty years ago an Englishman, George Orwell, wrote a scathing attack on the tendency of modern societies to merge toward thought control in his prophetic novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell, a man of the Left who criticized the Left, warned of the extremes of ultimate power and its subsequent abuses. His totalitarian world of Oceania drew a striking resemblance to his world of 1948 and our world of 1984.

In Oceania, ignorance is strength. The prevailing aristocracy is not one of "old money" or family ties, rather it is one made up of bureaucrats, scientists, technicians, trade-union organizers, publicity experts, sociologists, teachers, journalists, and professional politicians. These people whose origins lie in the salaried middle class are the new power brokers. Having been shaped by the barren world of monopolized industry and centralized government, they ruled with a lust for power for its own sake and with full awareness of their tyranny. The Party, as they are called, chose to exhibit themselves to the world in the guise of Big Brother, the fictional benevolent dictator. The infallible social rule was not the traditional father-to-son type, but based upon the persistence of a certain world-view and a certain way of life imposed upon society by force or fraud.¹

Oceania's Party rules by force in that it surpasses dictatorial regimes by its frequent, almost complacent, use of surveillance techniques like the omnipresent telescreens that watch every waking, sleeping, and yes, even excreting action. The Party enforces its will upon the minds and bodies of the populous. The super efficient Thought Police know every move, monitor every pulse, scrutinize every facial expression, and punish with torture and death, every "Thought Criminal."

To The Party, reality is not external. Reality exists in the human mind, and nowhere else. "Not in the individual mind, which can make mistakes, and in any case soon perishes; only in the mind of The Party, which is collective and immortal," as the interrogator O'Brien insists. Whatever The Party holds to be truth is truth. In Orwell's world, it is impossible to see reality except by looking through the eyes of The Party. If torture is what it takes to empty the individual's mind and fill it with this ideology, then so be it.¹

We live in a world where our 1984 is not as overtly totalitarian as Orwell's. We are not constantly under surveillance, forced a party line, made mindless by trivial, mentally dulling TV programming, or tortured into not only actions, but also beliefs; or are we?

Our world of 1984 is one of three superpowers constantly in a state of readiness for war, as were Orwell's Oceania, Eastasia, and Eurasia. This constant preparedness is one of basic standoff since no power dare attack the other. However, war preparations drive our economies and keep the people in constant fear of the opposing forces, thus in a contrasting, perverse way, we reinforce constant love for "what America stands for."

We are taught to believe in the country's ideals from childhood. Our blind pledges of allegiance to a symbolic flag, rather than to people, are no better than Orwell's depiction of blind loyalty to The Party with Big Brother as the flag. We are

propagandized and reinforced, not with torture as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but mentally dulled into cooperation by the "good life" of materialism as Aldous Huxley presented in his *Brave New World*.²

Therein lies our danger. We face a battle on dual fronts. On the one hand, we are taught to seek immediate material gratification and praise our country for being so good to us; on the other, this gratification further entrenches us in the slavery of debt and replacement due to obsolescence, and distracts us from the reality of the cesspools of power, the inequities of the economy, and the mindlessness of our consumer-oriented society.

Our automatic beliefs and actions will probably continue as society enters the Information Age. Like Oceania, our economy is becoming increasingly driven by communications and information. Since the outnumbering of blue-collar workers by white collar-workers in 1956, industrial America has been giving way to a new society, where, for the first time in recorded Western history, most of the working population is employed in the manipulation of information rather than the production of goods.³ A century ago, fewer than 10 percent of the American labor force were doing information related work. Now more than 50 percent are engaged in it.⁴ A recent projection by US News & World Report sees the service and information sector employment rising to 86 percent by the year 2000, surpassing manufacturing's 11 percent and agriculture's paltry 3 percent.⁵

Our world of 1984 and beyond will be one of exploitation of communications. Computers that talk, televisions that pull in hundreds of channels and telephones small enough to be worn on the wrist but able to handle calls from nearly anywhere in the world are only a few aspects of the telecommunications explosion. Neighbors, relatives and co-workers will be linked through communications networks designed along the lines of today's cable television systems. Home entertainment will be greatly enhanced, with theatre-like T.V. screens providing sharper pictures from signals transmitted via satellite or cable. Entertainment, news, public service and educational transmissions from worldwide sources (with simultaneous translations of foreign broadcasts) will provide new choices for an increasingly isolated humanity.⁶

Advances in electronic technology will make the typical 21st century household an information center. From their living rooms people will be able to buy groceries, bank, shop for clothing with electronic catalogs, and even buy and sell stocks.⁷ For the indefinite future, the home will remain the focal point of leisure activities. Advances in video technology will make media rooms commonplace. In such rooms, interactive, two-way cable channels, direct beamed satellite broadcasts and videodiscs will be enhanced by laser holography that can create three-dimensional images of oceans, jungles, island paradises, the Grand Canyon, or space travel in virtually every household. Holographic technology can put the three-dimensional image of a favorite singer, a museum exhibit, a ball game, or politicians into your living room. Plays, jazz concerts, and choirs could all be performed in the media room.⁸ On the horizon is experience cinema, where a 360-degree screen makes members of the audience feel as if they were in the middle of the picture.⁹

DataSpace, the invention of Nicholas Negroponte of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is another exciting computer-video environment. While sitting in a comfortable armchair, one is able to command the walls of a room as display areas. *DataSpace*'s data bank is organized to allow you to make imaginary journeys. The images on the walls move around your chair and appropriate sounds are generated over quadrasonic stereo.

Gordon Pask, co-author of *Micro Man*, relates his experience as he simulated a trip over MIT's campus and about Boston. He states that the effect of hearing the noise of the baseball stadium on the right as he moved towards it, and on the left as he moved away, was "quite extraordinary." It is a strange world, rich in experiences that information systems can open up to us. Yet, *DataSpace* convincingly demonstrates how artificial the boundary is between factual reality and the reality of imaginary worlds. It allows you to combine fact and fantasy and blurs the distinction between them.⁹ As we move to the extreme of experience cinema -the "feelie" movie -where in a Huxley-like *Brave New World* setting, we may satisfy our need for human contact through artificial simulations.⁸

Joseph Deken and Alvin Toffler talk of a time when we will inhabit "electronic cottages." Not only will we be entertained and informed at home, but we may actually work from home. As we become more dependent upon the high-tech information industries for employment, we reduce our tangible need to commute to offices. Toffler, author of the best selling futurist works, *Future Shock*, *The Third Wave*, and *Previews and Premises*, argues that since most new industries employ workers who handle information instead of things, most of their work could be done at home with existing technology.¹⁰ In-home computer terminals, coupled with two-way cable TV and advanced telephones will allow information workers to further isolate themselves from the rest of society. Imagine, even the informality and social cohesiveness of the office coffee break will be shattered.

Deken, author of *The Electronic Cottage*, sees a retooling of conventional media to bring newspapers, magazines, encyclopedias, novels, plays, and stock quotes into the home by the use of computer networks and television.¹¹ Instead of reading a newspaper, we would read the New York Times, via electronic terminals similar to TV screens. He also predicts, as has already happened, the tremendous increase in popularity of massive databanks. These electronic libraries allow people to retrieve data from constantly updated information sources that could include all the text in a 20-volume encyclopedia. Reference works, how-to manuals, popular fiction, and classics would be available to anyone with a computer terminal under this scenario.⁸

Each of these predictions shows a culture that is quickly moving toward a paperless and faceless society. Information will be extracted with minimal human interaction and so will transactions such as bill paying or minor purchasing. We are more reliant upon our technology than ever before. Information is seen as a critical resource in our lives and in the functioning of business enterprises. The faceless or non-human contact of our Information Age only enhances our vulnerability.

Dependence on databases to create and store reality of our transactions can be as dangerous as dependence on "feelie" TV for human companionship. Specifically, malicious or accidental destruction or corruption of databanks could virtually paralyze an enterprise. For example, a hospital database could be changed to result in a patient receiving the wrong medication. Leakage of military information could endanger national security. Erroneous information in an airline database could threaten passenger safety. The effect depends upon not only the information itself, but also on the improper action taken against it.¹²

Consider the case of Catherine Tarver, who the Privacy Protection Study Commission called a "welfare mother" from Washington State. Mrs. Tarver became ill and was hospitalized in the late 1960s. After reviewing a report by her caseworker that contained "derogatory contents," including allegations of child neglect, the Department of Public Assistance placed her children in temporary custody. A few months later, the Juvenile Court exonerated Mrs. Tarver and returned her children, but the caseworker's report remained in her file. Although Mrs. Tarver had her children back and was no longer on the welfare rolls, her file continued to contain this false, misleading, and prejudicial report. When she asked for a fair hearing to challenge the report, the Public Assistance Department rejected her request because the grievance was no longer directly related to public assistance. Her suit in a State court and even the Supreme Court failed to remove the report from her file.¹³

Such cases are common in the Information Society. They show our profound impotency when dealing with a computerized record keeping system. In effect, we are the pawns of the bureaucracy and just as Orwell's culture of Oceania deleted all references to political dissidents, making them "Unpersons," we too face the possibility of not existing in the records of machines.

Bills that were paid but not credited to our accounts have frustrated us all. We remember the embarrassment of checks that bounced while we knew that the deposit covered the check. We shudder at our helplessness when trying to correct all of the erroneous records in computers all over the country, due to a mistake by the bank or credit bureau. We have heard

of checks mailed to dead people and people, very much alive, being classified as dead. Orwell's Unperson was an accurate foreshadowing of our dilemma.

Even more inflammatory than the mistakes in databases is our utmost reliance upon them. Our economy, driven by computers, requires identification numbers, credit records, medical, dental, educational, criminal, and family records to be stored, matched, updated, and eventually purged. There is no other alternative. Today's economy runs on plastic credit cards. Even if you offer to prepay the rate in cash, just try to rent a car without a credit card. Once again we are vulnerable.

The ultimate threat to privacy and distortions of reality revolve around the use of our files by agencies to judge our creditworthiness, our insurability, our employability, educatability, and our desirability as neighbors or tenants. As the Privacy Commission points out, "The banking transactions of an individual give a fairly accurate account of his religion, ideology, opinion and interest. Moreover, the checking account emerges as an economic and social diary for many individuals."¹³ This creates an enormous potential threat to the privacy and accuracy of our personal records in databanks, nationwide. Through maliciousness or accident we may become an Unperson, or at least an undesirable.

As we dash into the paperless society, with written records and receipts fading into the "inaccuracy of individual memories," as Orwell's Party would state it, the reality of our transactions, our lives, and the lives of others become flexible. Just as encyclopedias can be constantly updated online, so can our records. From the bureaucracy's perspective, our reality exists at its discretion.

Our society faces similar dangers of manipulated reality on the visual front. The fact that television has become more influential in our lives comes as no surprise. Most American homes have TVs. Indeed a great many have several sets and by the end of 1981, 20 million homes were wired to receive cable television.¹⁰ By the end of this decade, industry experts expect that about 58 million homes - 61 percent of the nation's television households - will have access to cable service.¹⁴ And, the amount of time spent by each of us watching TV will probably continue to increase. (Currently, children watch an average of 5 hours per day, according to Ron Wilson, Vice President of WCE T-TV, Cincinnati.)¹⁵

Television, as our primary means of mass communication, has a powerful impact upon our attitudes and perceptions of reality. It helps us watch the horizon for news that affects our lives, it helps society reach consensus on social actions, transmit the culture of our society to new members, entertain us, and sell goods and services.¹⁶ It is our most powerful medium, transmitting visual images, that remain in our memories forever and transforming values, attitudes and beliefs. As French media expert, Jacques Ellul puts it: [this] "propaganda is characterized by an institutional quality with techniques of psychological influence combined with techniques of organization and the envelopment of people with the intention of sparking action."¹⁷ So, propaganda, be it political, social, religious or commercial, seeks to influence behavior and beliefs. Combined with the powerful impact of the visual imagery of television, propaganda can be used to change our concept of reality, formulate new wants and desires, and even create whole new, sometimes fake, realities.

Consider how we were programmed to fear and hate China during the Vietnam and Korean wars. Taiwan was the friend, Red China the enemy. Suddenly, improved relations during the Nixon and Carter Administrations changed our enemies from Red China to the friendly Peoples Republic of China. No longer was China the enemy. Recently, the Reagan Administration changed policies and once again our relations with China are on a down hill slide. The point here is one of formations of attitudes and the amazing 180-degree turns that propaganda facilitates.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell's Oceania, similarly, cannot make up its mind with whom it is at war. One day Eurasia is the enemy, Eastasia the ally. The next day the reverse is true. Amazingly, propaganda triumphs as the populous of Oceania quickly changes attitudes without actually noticing it.

Another example of propaganda with an Orwellian flair is our creative manipulation of accounting figures. One month, recession is destroying the economy, the Gross National Product is down, productivity slips, interest rates are high, inflation is in double digits, and unemployment over 10 percent nationwide and over 20 percent in the minority community. A change in accounting methods coupled with a few rousing Presidential speeches and reinforcement by the news media, and overnight we are expected to believe that there is no inflation, recovery is at hand, productivity increasing, and unemployment on a downturn. All of this while our groceries, rents, and utilities cost more than yesterday and 20 percent of minority America remains unemployed. What a farce! It approaches the incessant ravings of the news reporters in the fictional Oceania. One minute chocolate rations must be decreased to 20 percent, the next, Big Brother announces that productivity improvements allow him to raise the ration to 20 percent. If this sounds a little too familiar to you, take a closer look at the strange bedfellows that government and the media make. Consider how both the Argentines and the British claimed to be winning the Falklands War, or the eerie sense of despair that one gets as *Capricorn One*, the movie that fakes a moon landing, is watched, or the nightmare of *War Games*, where nuclear attack is simulated on computer monitors. Consider these and re-evaluate our vulnerability to distortions of facts through the media.

Propagandized media is also of extreme political importance. The 1960 Presidential election was the first test of television's power to create a political image. John Kennedy's youth, vigor and compassion was what America was looking for and TV helped portray that image. In *The Making of The President*, Theodore White explores this theme, and others, with insightful revelations on how television was crucial to the Kennedy campaign.¹⁸

Since then merchandising political candidates has been developed into a science. As embarrassing as it may be to a democracy, the fact is that 30 to 40 percentage points determining the outcome of a major election can be bought from public relations firms - firms not famous for their prudent selectivity or high ethical concerns. With better communications and computers these distorters of reality have increasing power to create candidates and to reach new heights, or depths, of subtle demagoguery. Starting with vast sums of money they can hire an actor, add makeup, program him with computer-prepared script based upon the populace's latest fears (earlier induced by the same mass communications), and broadcast ten second film clips until the polls predict success.¹⁹

As easily as the media can create a candidate, so can it destroy one. When Vice Presidential candidate Thomas Eagleton was alleged to have been under psychiatric care, whether it was true or not, his political career was over. Frank Donner, formerly of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), in his book, *The Age of Surveillance* shares depressing tales of character assassinations of mainstream and left wing black politicians of the 1960's. With their operations CHAOS and COINTELPRO, the FBI and CIA performed domestic surveillance on over 10,000 individuals and over 100 domestic groups, including an outright, deliberate, prolonged attack on the reputation of Dr. Martin Luther King by his personal rival J. Edgar Hoover. Surveillance, phone taps, planted stories in newspapers, taped discussions, and forged letters were only a few of the tactics used to discredit black leaders. Revealing and fabricating everything from communist ties to sexual perversions, the FBI systematically attempted to destroy the credibility and effectiveness of this leadership.

According to Donner, J. Edgar Hoover used the media, through dirty tricks and sympathetic journalists, to carry out the character assassination of Dr. King with plans to replace him with a new black national leader, Samuel Pierce, currently in the Reagan Administration. When we consider the effectiveness of the media in creating candidates as effectively as desires for Jordache jeans, this plan is the vilest. In this scenario, we no longer pick our leaders. They are formed and sold to us in a way that we believe that we actually chose them.

The matter at hand is serious! The population of Orwell's Oceania never picked Big Brother as a leader. Indeed, he did not even exist, yet almost everyone loved and obeyed him. Thought control and media blitz are dangerous potentials in our Information Age. Awareness and a constant struggle for free thought must be waged.

We must know that the trite being broadcast on TV or radio's "Rap Music" can be entertaining, yet mentally stultifying. Knowledge of two-way cable TV and its potential to not only send you a signal but also become like Orwell's telescreens by sending a signal to a master console from a built-in camera, allowing direct monitoring of your home, is crucial. Monitoring of which channel a television is tuned is as simple as pointing a device at your home antenna or storing your cable selections in a database for future review by say, the Moral Majority.¹⁵

Surveillance alone is not the problem. It is surveillance and the means to reinforce, through force or fraud, the propagandized reality that threatens our freedom. Persuasion-by-association where the viewer is constantly bombarded with direct links between his or her deepest desires and the message being given is only a precursor of things to come.² Subliminal projection, where short messages, too short to be visually recognized, are interspersed between frames of a television film are also possible. The viewer's mind picks up the suggested message while the consciousness ignores it.²

Finally, we must beware the hidden potential of biocomps. Revolutions in computer technology and bioengineering have produced the potential for developing and implanting in the brain miniature computers made from organic molecules that may even reproduce and assemble themselves.²¹ Therefore, biocomps (for Biological Computers) pose the hope of advancing continuous medical monitoring of bodily functions and early warning of problems. This all sounds marvelous - the very thing society needs. But there are problems. It would be easy for a biocomp, instead of informing 'Your blood pressure is up to 190, please lie down,' to say 'You will vote for General X in our free and fair national elections, otherwise you will suffer a headache so severe as to make you wish you had never been born,' as outlined by Chris Morgan, author of *Future Man*. With all biocomps connected by radio control it would not be an empty threat. Citizens with biocomps could become slaves of the state. Particular actions could be demanded or prohibited. Like Nineteen Eighty-Four's Thought Police, thoughts of treason might be picked up and the thinker punished, perhaps by being made to inflict self-torture. A central monitoring department could notice any crimes, even minor infringements. Not only would Big Brother be watching but his reactions would be swifter and his control more far reaching than George Orwell ever imagined.²² Under Morgan's scenario, The Party's goal would be met: reality would exist only in the mind and at the discretion of The Party.

High-tech America would fare well to take heed of Orwell's novel. Society's most powerless and vulnerable need to take special precautions to protect the only realm in which we are free -- our minds.

Of intellectual virtue it is impossible to have too much, for our reasons are the best and most divine element in us.

- Aristotle

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