

**DD316\_1**

**George Orwell and Nineteen Eighty-Four**

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978-1-4730-3689-5 (.kdl)
978-1-4730-3690-1 (.epub)

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## Introduction

It is now over 70 years since the publication of George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four – a terrifying dystopian novel in which a totalitarian state maintains psychological and physical control over a joyless, fearful population.

Start of Box

**Totalitarianism**

Totalitarianism is a political system in which order is imposed on the population through ideological manipulation and the systematic use of state terror. A totalitarian state is a one-party state in which dissent is ruthlessly suppressed. The term has been used to describe both Hitler's Germany (a fascist totalitarian state) and Stalin's Soviet Union (a communist totalitarian state).

End of Box

In an era of ‘post-truth’, in which people are routinely subjected to new pervasive forms of surveillance, and a world in which many politicians and others in positions of power no longer even pretend that ‘ordinary rules’ apply to them, many would claim that the messages of Nineteen Eighty-Four have acquired a new contemporary relevance. Is it any coincidence that Nineteen Eighty-Four went to the top of the Amazon bestsellers list in the US in 2013 when the story of Ed Snowden as the NSA ‘whistle blower’ first broke, and again in early 2017, just as the newly elected Donald Trump (with his insistence that any inconvenient facts or criticism constituted ‘fake news’) took office? Many people will also have reached for their copy of Nineteen Eighty-Four after hearing Kellyanne Conway (then one of Trump’s senior aides) use the phrase ‘alternative facts’ in defence of the White House press secretary’s (disputed) claim about the size of the crowds lining the National Mall in Washington DC to witness Trump's inauguration in January 2017 (Swaine, 2017).

This free short course will provide you with an introduction to the main themes of Nineteen Eighty-Four. You will focus on the distinctive language and terminology Orwell used. You will understand the connections between some key events in Orwell’s life and the political ideas which underpin Nineteen Eighty-Four. You will also see how Orwell foreshadowed some of the issues that we now face in contemporay society. The course will be taught through a mixture of text and audio material.

This course will be an ideal accompaniment to the novel. You will also gain some insight into the historical and political context in which the novel was written and published. To get full benefit from this course and the activities in particular, it is suggested that you either read the book as you progress through the course or read it before you start the course. Reading the book is not included in the course study time.

This OpenLearn course is produced in association with The Open University course [DD316 Modern political ideas](https://www.open.ac.uk/courses/modules/dd316). It was written by Dr Susan Allen. Susan Allen has been employed as an Associate Lecturer at The Open University since 1999. Her academic and research interests lay within the disciplines of politics and international relations.

## Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

* appreciate and recognise the distinctive language and terminology of Nineteen Eighty-Four
* understand the historical and political context of Orwell’s writing
* understand how political language, including concepts and ideas, is used
* appreciate the contemporary relevance of Orwell’s novel and the reasons for its enduring appeal.

## 1 Orwell’s route to Nineteen Eighty-Four

Nineteen Eighty-Four centres around totalitarianism. Despite this, George Orwell did not have any first-hand knowledge of living in a totalitarian state. He paid just one visit to Germany (in 1945, at the end of the Second World War) and he never visited the Soviet Union. Like others, Orwell had watched from afar as Germany descended from democracy to totalitarianism after Hitler came to power in 1933. Orwell was also aware of reports of Stalin’s purges and the ‘show trials’ of the 1930s (although the full horror of the Stalin era was not revealed until years later), but Orwell’s defining first-hand political experiences were in Spain. There, in July 1936, civil war had broken out following an attempted right-wing military coup against the recently (democratically) elected left-leaning Republican coalition ‘Popular Front’ government.

The Spanish Civil War was to become a highly symbolic cause celebre for idealistic left-wing sympathisers from outside Spain. Orwell travelled to Spain as a journalist at the end of 1936. On arrival, however, he enlisted in an Independent Labour Party Republican unit and was sent to fight on the relatively quiet Aragon Front. He fought in Spain for six months before being badly wounded by a sniper’s bullet. On his return to England in 1937, Orwell set down his partial, impressionistic accounts of what he had seen in Spain – including his disillusionment after witnessing the in-fighting and often brutal factionalism within the pro- and anti- Stalinist communist left in Barcelona.

Orwell’s experiences in Spain during the Spanish Civil War, which is now regarded as a curtain raiser for the Second World War, also convinced him that ideology – of both the far right and the far left – taken to extremes may lead to evil. It was in Spain that Orwell began to think seriously about what were to become the key underlying themes of Nineteen Eighty-Four: the importance of objective ‘truth’, the role of propaganda, what it would be like to live under an authoritarian regime, and why democracy should never be taken for granted.

Many critics have argued that, in terms of plot, Nineteen Eighty-Four is not entirely original. For example, it draws comparisons with an earlier political novel, Yevgeny Zamyatin’s We, (written in the early 1920s) which, like Nineteen Eighty-Four, was banned in the Soviet Union until 1988. Zamyatin – who had initially supported the 1917 Russian Revolution – portrays a world far into the future, ruled by an all-seeing and all-knowing ‘Benefactor’. Zamyatin’s novel’s influence on Nineteen Eighty-Four, as well as Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World, is clear.

Start of Figure



**Figure 1** Ninteen Eighty-Four was first published in 1949

[View description - Figure 1 Ninteen Eighty-Four was first published in 1949](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session1_Alternative1)

End of Figure

Neither was Orwell especially original in his depiction of technology – both HG Wells and EM Forster (to name but two) had already depicted future societies in which people’s lives are ruled by machines and other technologies. Other critics have argued that as a work of literature some of Orwell’s characterisation is thin. But does this matter? Most people would say ‘no’ because of the sheer power of the novel: Orwell’s opening sentence ‘It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen’ (Orwell, 1949) remains one of the most famous in modern English literature. Likewise, the adjective ‘Orwellian’ (first used by the novelist Mary McCarthy in 1950) has now passed into the English language. Few people who have read Nineteen Eighty-Four ever forget it.

Before going on to study Nineteen Eighty-Four in more depth, you will first explore more about Orwell himself – and the political experiences which informed so much of his writing.

## 2 Who was George Orwell?

To begin to get a greater understanding of who George Orwell was, now listen to Geoff Andrews of The Open University’s politics department interview D. J. Taylor, a writer and biographer, and the author of Orwell: A Life. Listen to Audio 1 a couple of times (which was originally recorded as a video) and then complete Activity 1.

Start of Media Content

Audio content is not available in this format.

**Audio 1**

[View transcript - Audio 1](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session2_Transcript1)

End of Media Content

Start of Activity

**Activity 1**

Start of Question

Having listened to the discussion between Geoff Andrews and D. J. Taylor, note down what you see as being the key influences in Orwell’s early life which may have set him aware of some political themes. What were these and how significant do you think they were?

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

[View discussion - Activity 1](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session2_Discussion1)

End of Activity

To add to D. J. Taylor’s comments in Audio 1, you should recognise that George Orwell (educated at Eton) saw himself as a democratic socialist, but never a communist.

Start of Box

**Socialism**

Socialism as an ideology emerged in the West during the early 19th century as a reaction to the economic and social inequalities generated by industrial capitalism. A core aim of socialism is to advance the interests of the working classes by promoting social and economic equality. However, there are a number of strands and divisions within socialism, and each 'sees' the means for attaining social and economic equality differently. So-called 'hard' variants of socialism (those within the communist tradition) advocate the complete abolition of the capitalist system through revolution. In contrast, 'softer' versions (such as those within the democratic socialist tradition) aim to achieve necessary reform through democratic means (the ballot box). The 'softest' version of all (social democracy) does not seek to provide an alternative to capitalism. Rather, it aims to modify capitalism (e.g. through the provision of a mixed economy and a welfare state).

The Labour Party (which emerged out of the trades union movement at the very end of the 19th century) was never a revolutionary socialist party. The Labour Party has always been a 'broad Church' with some members and MPs on the extreme left, while others occupy a position just to the left of centre. Under Attlee, the Labour Party (after gaining office in 1945 following a landslide election victory) was responsible for the implementation of an extensive welfare state, including the establishment of the NHS.

End of Box

## 2.1 Orwell and socialism

What lay behind Orwell’s socialism? Orwell’s ‘conversion’ to (democratic) socialism dated from the mid-1930s and was prompted, in large part, by his investigation into the poverty and living conditions of the northern working class (a commissioned work of reportage published, in 1936, as The Road to Wigan Pier). Britain, in Orwell’s view, was a country governed by the rich and ridden with outdated class privileges. He likened Britain to ‘a family with the wrong members in control’ (Orwell, 1941, p.35). For Orwell, socialism was about addressing social and economic injustices and improving the lives of ordinary people. Orwell had little (if any) interest in political theory itself. He was suspicious of ideology, which in the wrong hands could become what he famously called ‘smelly little orthodoxies’. Orwell, then, was no ideologue.

Start of Figure



**Figure 2** George Orwell (1903–1950)

[View description - Figure 2 George Orwell (1903–1950)](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session2_Alternative1)

End of Figure

For Orwell, socialism was first and foremost about ‘common decency’ (a phrase he used often). His views on the Soviet Union set him apart from the left-wing ‘establishment’ at the time. Unlike many other writers and public intellectuals in the 1930s, Orwell was neither beguiled by the Soviet Union (as a ‘pioneer’ socialist state) nor a (pragmatic) apologist for Stalin. He never believed that the ‘ends’ justified the ‘means’. His suspicions of the British Communist Party as mere ‘dupes’ of Moscow were confirmed in August 1939 when, after loudly demanding that Britain stand up to Hitler, the Party was, on instructions from Moscow, forced into an embarrassing volte face after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop (Nazi-Soviet) pact. The Party refused to support Britain’s declaration of war in September 1939 on the grounds it was an ‘imperialist’ war – a line it maintained until Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941.

Orwell’s outspoken criticisms of communist factionalism and abuses of power that he had witnessed in Spain had already alienated much of the British left (gathered as it was around the New Statesman magazine and Victor Gollancz’s Left Book Club). Orwell’s critics accused him of attempting to undermine the credibility of the Republican popular front. Later, in 1944, Orwell was surprised and angered when Gollancz (who had published Orwell’s work in the early 1930s and had gone on to commission The Road to Wigan Pier) declined the manuscript of Orwell’s satirical ‘fairy tale’ of the Russian Revolution, Animal Farm, because it was critical of Soviet-style communism. Other publishers also refused the manuscript on the grounds that the war against Germany was not yet won, and the Soviet Union remained a vital ally.

Start of Box

**Orwell and Englishness**

Orwell’s sense of ‘Englishness’ informed much of his writing. He had admired the ‘quiet’ patriotism he’d found within working class communities. In The Lion and the Unicorn (written in London in 1941 when Blitz was at its height), Orwell was adamant about the need for political change. However, he had more faith in the patriotic decency of the ‘common people’ than in the ‘Europeanised’ English intelligentsia who, Orwell claimed, ‘took their cookery from Paris and their opinions from Moscow’ (Orwell, 1941, p. 48). Owell set out an agenda for a very ‘English’ political revolution.

Writing in 1941 (when the end of the Second World War was still four years away), Orwell believed that the working classes would continue to make the necessary sacrifices just so long as they believed that they and their children could look forward to a better life when the war ended. The sort of socialist revolution that Orwell hoped to see (and which he believed would be necessary to build a just post-war society) would not be led by communists and it would not involve the hoisting of red flags or street fighting. Instead, it would require a fundamental shift of power – achieved through democratic means.

In 1941, Orwell did not believe that communism exerted any sort of popular appeal in Britain, but he was concerned that the appeal of fascism might be greater – as it had proved to be in civilised countries such as Germany and Italy. Orwell believed that a democratic socialist movement, which could win the support of the mass of working people, was the best guarantee against fascism taking hold in Britain.

End of Box

## 3 Summary of Nineteen Eighty-Four

In Nineteen Eighty-Four, the world is divided into three perpetually warring super states – Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia. Britain (following a long-forgotten atomic war) is now known as Airstrip One – a province of Oceania – and London is its chief city. The state (the Party) presided over by the omniscient ‘Big Brother’ uses technology to exert total control over everything and everyone. Tele-screens are positioned in people’s homes as a means of surveillance. Posters on walls warn that ‘Big Brother is watching you’. No one can escape the scrutiny of the Thought Police, and ‘spies and saboteurs’ will be rooted out. The Party is even in the process of transforming existing standard English, Oldspeak, into a new simplified official language, Newspeak. Once Newspeak has finally superseded Oldspeak, there will be no vocabulary for the expression of ‘heretic’ thoughts or ideas.

Start of Figure



**Figure 3** ‘Big Brother is watching you’

[View description - Figure 3 ‘Big Brother is watching you’](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session3_Alternative1)

End of Figure

Nineteen Eighty-Four depicts a fearful, atomised society in which a spurious unity is forged through a compulsory ‘love’ of Big Brother and the brief collective disinhibited hysteria of the daily ritual of the ‘Two Minutes Hate’ – directed at the tele-screened image of the ‘arch-traitor’ Emmanuel Goldstein (the ‘Enemy of the People’). This is a society in which young children are encouraged to denounce their parents and people may disappear (vaporised) overnight. Only the ‘proles’ (the uneducated masses) live relatively ‘free’ lives – deemed too unimportant and too indolent to threaten the power of the Party.

In the novel, the main character, Winston Smith, a minor civil servant in his 30s, is employed in the Records Department of one of the four branches of government – the so-called Ministry of Truth. In reality, the Ministry of Truth, concerns itself with lies. The Ministry of Peace concerns itself with war. The windowless Ministry of Love maintains order through terror, and the Ministry of Plenty presides over a society of permanent scarcity. One of the functions of the Ministry of Truth is to rewrite the past according to the whims of the Party. Winston’s job is to alter (or in the official phrase, to ‘rectify’) figures and other inconvenient facts in back numbers of newspapers, books, and other documents. It is, nonetheless, routine work within a large department and Winston is an insignificant member of the ‘Outer Party’ (a group not admitted to the privileged ‘Inner Party’).

Winston lives alone in a small, dingy flat in Victory Mansions, a nondescript apartment block in central London. As the novel opens, Winston is harbouring subversive thoughts. As an act of rebellion, he has purchased a notebook with the intention of keeping a diary – an act punishable by death or, at the very least, 25 years in a forced labour camp.

Start of Activity

**Activity 2**

Start of Question

What significance do you attach to Orwell’s terminology here: ‘the Ministry of Truth’ and ‘the Ministry of Peace’?

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

[View discussion - Activity 2](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session3_Discussion1)

End of Activity

Orwell’s novel is a far from comforting read, but it is also one that helps many people make sense of what is happening in the world. After the end of the Cold War, and the subsequent implosion of the Soviet Union (1989–91), it might have been assumed that Nineteen Eighty-Four would soon lose its relevance. When Berlin Wall fell, it was a common assumption (in the West at least) that the world could only move in one (progressive) direction – more open, more liberal, more democratic. Now, over 30 years later, it is only too evident that such optimism was misplaced. Liberal democracy is now under considerable strain and new forms of authoritarianism are on the rise around the world.

## 4 The publication of Nineteen Eighty-Four

Orwell suffered from poor health throughout his life and was already seriously ill (with an incurable form of tuberculosis) when he was writing Nineteen Eighty-Four.

The cultural and political impact of Nineteen Eighty-Four was immediate. It was published in June 1949 – against the backdrop of the beginning of the Cold War and amid increasing anti-communist hysteria on both sides of the Atlantic. Orwell’s critique of totalitarian and monolithic party systems and dominant ideologies was eagerly adopted by opponents of communism (and by those who were suspicious of ‘the left’ more generally).

Start of Box

**McCarthyism**

While there was a tendency in Britain to fear ‘reds under the beds’, communists (and alleged communists or sympathisers) were rooted out far more systematically in the US during the early 1950s in what became known as ‘McCarthyism’.

Senator Joseph McCarthy led a series of investigations of those suspected of coming under communist influence. McCarthy’s targets were mainly people working in US government departments and the film and entertainment industry. Many of McCarthy’s charges were unsubstantiated and little real evidence was offered. Since then, the term ‘McCarthyism’ has been used for a politically motivated witch hunt.

End of Box

In the US and Britain, those on the political right seized upon the novel as a thinly veiled criticism of the ‘statism’ of the Labour government. This distressed Orwell. In July 1949, a month after the novel was published, he issued a statement making it clear that the novel was neither an attack on the Labour Party in Britain nor on democratic socialism. It was an attack on the dangers posed by both communism and fascism – and the strength of his argument in Nineteen Eighty-Four is that it could apply to a range of totalitarian systems.

Orwell died in January 1950, just seven months after the novel was published. He did not live long enough to engage with the various interpretations of the ‘meaning’ of Nineteen Eighty-Four or the significance of its ‘Appendix’ (which takes the form of a ‘scholarly’ article written at an unspecified time well into the future). Clearly though (whatever else he may have had in mind), Orwell intended Nineteen Eighty-Four as a satirical warning against a descent into totalitarianism.

## 5 The language of Nineteen Eighty-Four

It is a measure of the power and influence of the novel that several words and phrases, together with an adjective ‘Orwellian’, have now passed into the English language.

Start of Activity

**Activity 3**

Start of Question

In the box below, note down as many words and phrases from Nineteen Eighty-Four that are now used in the English language. For each word or phrase, you should give an example of its usage. Which term or phrase used by Orwell do you think is the most relevant for today’s society?

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

[View discussion - Part](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session5_Discussion1)

Start of Question

What does ‘Orwellian’ mean to you?

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

[View discussion - Part](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session5_Discussion2)

End of Activity

The language used by Orwell in Nineteen Eighty-Four is one example of how the novel has stood the test of time. In the next section, you will explore its continuing relevance in today’s society.

## 6 The continuing relevance of Nineteen Eighty-Four

In this section, you will move to an assessment of the current relevance of Nineteen Eighty-Four by following three key themes of the novel: surveillance, free speech, and post-truth.

Start of Figure



**Figure 4** In Nineteen Eighty-Four, Orwell foreshadowed some of the issues that we now face in contemporay society

[View description - Figure 4 In Nineteen Eighty-Four, Orwell foreshadowed some of the issues that we ...](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session6_Alternative1)

End of Figure

## 6.1 Surveillance

In Nineteen Eighty-Four, Winston Smith is constantly aware that Big Brother is watching him. A key theme of the novel is the extent to which the state (or The Party) keeps the population under control by using surveillance to suppress dissident ideas or internal criticism of the party. This is, of course, routine in non-democratic states. For example, you can see parallels in contemporary China which is a one-party state in which the Chinese Communist Party allows its citizens ‘freedom’ as consumers, but otherwise exerts total political control over their lives. However, even in a democratic country such as the UK, the government also holds an enormous amount of data on its population. In Activity 4, you will explore contemporary examples of the novel’s continuing significance by considering this in more detail.

Start of Figure



**Figure 5** Surveillance is a key theme in Nineteen Eighty-Four

[View description - Figure 5 Surveillance is a key theme in Nineteen Eighty-Four](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session6_Alternative2)

End of Figure

Start of Activity

**Activity 4**

Start of Question

In the box below, note down what information the UK government (or government of any other democratic country) holds about its population and how information can be traced.

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

[View discussion - Part](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session6_Discussion1)

Start of Question

Do you think that the amount of personal data held by the government is necessary for the effective governance of a modern society such as the UK? Or do you think there is cause for concern? Note down your thoughts in the box below.

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

[View discussion - Part](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session6_Discussion2)

Start of Question

Over the course of a typical week, how often do you provide third parties with your personal details or give out other personal information? Make a note in the box below.

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

[View discussion - Part](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session6_Discussion3)

End of Activity

## 6.2 Free speech

A key theme of Nineteen Eighty-Four is freedom of speech and the use of language. In the novel, people are not free to speak out or even to think certain thoughts. The use (and misuse) of language is now also a feature of contemporary politics. Threats to free speech and ‘de-platforming’ those whose views are thought to be ‘disagreeable’ or cause ‘offence’ are now at the frontline of today’s ‘culture wars’. On one side are those who argue that in a democracy people must be allowed to speak freely – even if that means airing views that might offend others. On the other side are those who defend their right ‘not to be offended’ – and who argue that what one group claims as the right to free speech is more about that group maintaining its power and privilege.

Start of Figure



**Figure 6** In Nineteen Eighty-Four people are not free to speak out or even to think certain thoughts

[View description - Figure 6 In Nineteen Eighty-Four people are not free to speak out or even to think ...](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session6_Alternative3)

End of Figure

The terms ‘troll’ and ‘Twitterstorm’ are recent additions to our vocabulary. Social media allows many people to connect with others in positive ways. However, social media also disinhibits. When you encounter ‘strangers’ in person, your behaviour towards them (and theirs towards you) is governed by widely understood norms and customs – the ‘unwritten’ rules of civility which help to order society. These norms and customs are largely absent from social media.

Free speech was important to Orwell as a writer. Does everyone have an equal right to speak out on any topic? Has Twitter, for example, democratised politics and allowed more people to have a voice? Or has it fuelled a tribal regressive politics which encourages the censorship of speech and ideas and a mob outrage more reminiscent of the ‘two minutes hate’?

Start of Activity

**Activity 5**

Start of Question

What do you think Orwell would make of today’s ‘free speech wars’?

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

[View discussion - Activity 5](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session6_Discussion4)

End of Activity

## 6.3 Post-truth

In many ways Nineteen Eighty-Four anticipated the current phenomenon of post-truth. Post-truth may be defined as:

Start of Quote

The circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.

(Oxford English Dictionary, 2017 quoted in D’Ancona, 2017, p. 9)

End of Quote

Start of Quote

… a phenomenon… where emotional response and emotional resonance matter more than facts and evidence in decision making and in political discourse.

(D’Ancona, 2017, p. 9)

End of Quote

In the following interview, Matthew D’Ancona, a Guardian columnist, sets out what he means by the term and the impact he thinks it will have on the future of politics.

Start of Media Content

Audio content is not available in this format.

**Audio 2**

[View transcript - Audio 2](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session6_Transcript1)

End of Media Content

Post-truth can be compared to the concept of doublethink, a term Orwell introduced in Chapter III of Nineteen Eighty-Four:

Start of Quote

To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them both to be contradictory and believing in both of them; to repudiate morality while laying claim to it

(Orwell, 1949, pp.40–41)

End of Quote

Doublethink, then, forces people to ignore an objective reality and accept an alternative ‘truth’. The concept of doublespeak also allows you to reflect on the ways in which conspiracy theories and the spread of ‘fake news’ are a characteristic of a post-truth society. Once again, it can be argued that this is enabled by social media – which often serves as an echo chamber and enables lies to spread quickly. One recent example is the ways in which the anti-vaccine lobby was able to perpetrate false claims and stories about the provenance and safety of the various COVID-19 vaccines. Twitter, Facebook and so on now use software to catch automated accounts (known as bots) but many more ‘sophisticated’ bots escape attention. Therefore, another serious concern is the apparent ease by which it is still possible to create ‘fake’ social media accounts (often from so-called troll farms), which can fabricate posts and amplify deliberate lies and other forms of ‘disinformation’ so that they are seen, believed, and passed on by more ‘real people’.

Start of Figure



**Figure 7** Today’s use of social media enables the spread of fake news

[View description - Figure 7 Today’s use of social media enables the spread of fake news](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session6_Alternative4)

End of Figure

Authoritarian states such as Russia and China appear to routinely manipulate social media platforms to neutralise domestic dissent. However, in recent years there have been credible claims that Russia has used Western social media platforms to attempt to destabilise Western democratic institutions or influence the outcome of certain elections. For example, there were accusations of Russian involvement in the US presidential election of 2016 and the UK pro-Brexit campaign. However, the manipulation of social media is not confined to authoritarian states. Social media is a low-cost method of campaigning. Some would claim that this is a democratising development because it allows more direct forms of democracy. However, critics would also point out that by enabling politicians to bypass the traditional media (the press, radio, and television), it also allows them to bypass its editorial controls as well. The one-time Trump aide, Steve Bannon once claimed that the mainstream media was the ‘real opposition’ to Donald Trump (Gambino, 2017).

Orwell set great store by the ‘truth’. Of course, many politicians have always relied on lying as a strategy to get themselves out of difficult situations. However, what Orwell termed ‘organised lying’ (Orwell, 1946, 1947, p. 383) is not the same as spur of the moment expediency. It is, as Orwell pointed out, systematic and integral to totalitarianism. Totalitarian regimes create their own history by ‘rewriting the past’ because it is necessary for the past to be re-shaped to suit the needs of the regime. It was in Spain that Orwell first realised how deliberate, systematic lies may be used as political weapons and how readily those lies will be accepted. In a totalitarian society, only one version of the ‘truth’ is allowed at any given moment. In ‘post-truth’ society there are many versions of the ‘truth’ circulating at any one time. However, if there is less regard for ‘objective facts’ in a post-truth society, does that make it easier for authoritarianism (which may lead to totalitarianism) to gain a foothold?

What is also new about the new era of post-truth is the extent to which it demonstrates how standards in public life have changed. Where it was once obligatory for a politician caught out by a major lie or cover up to resign from office or suffer the consequences, it no longer seems to be an automatic disqualification. Tony Blair’s political career never recovered from the fall-out from the 2003 invasion of Iraq because the so-called ‘dodgy dossier’ still mattered to the electorate. Nick Clegg’s reputation among younger voters was irrevocably tainted by his failure to keep a promise on tuition fees made in the 2010 Liberal Democrat election manifesto. However, the Boris Johnson premiership from 2019 encompassed several scandals without leading to resignations.

## 7 Orwell and totalitarianism

Orwell intended Nineteen Eighty-Four as a warning, rather than a prophecy. He was writing on the verge of the Cold War and his critique of totalitarian regimes, monolithic party systems and dominant ideologies was eagerly adopted by opponents of communism, particularly during what became known as the era of McCarthyism. However, the strength of Nineteen Eighty-Four is that the regime he described could apply to a range of totalitarian systems.

As Orwell wrote, in 1942, in response to those who believed that totalitarianism ‘could not happen here’:

Start of Quote

Before writing off the totalitarian world as a nightmare that can’t come true, just remember that in 1925 the world of today would have seemed a nightmare that couldn’t come true. Against that shifting phantasmagoric world in which black may be white tomorrow and yesterday’s weather can be changed by decree, there are really only two safeguards. One is that however much you deny the truth, the truth goes on existing, as it were, behind your back, and you consequently can’t violate it in ways that imply military efficiency. The other is that so long as some parts of the earth remain unconquered, the liberal tradition can be kept alive…. We in England underrate the danger of this kind of thing because our traditions and our past security have given us a sentimental belief that it all comes right in the end and the thing you most fear never happens. Nourished for hundreds of years on a literature in which Right invariably triumphs in the last chapter, we believe half-instinctively that evil always defeats itself in the long run…. But why should it?

(Orwell, 1942)

End of Quote

Start of Activity

**Activity 6**

Start of Question

Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four as well as his broader writings have been used to explain the meaning of totalitarianism, its main features and the situations in which it could arise.

Listen to this audio taken from The Open University course Modern Political Ideas, in which Dr Richard Heffernan discusses the meaning of totalitarianism today. Listen to the audio at least twice then, when you have done so, note down your thoughts in response to the following questions.

Start of Media Content

Audio content is not available in this format.

**Audio 3**

[View transcript - Audio 3](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session7_Transcript1)

End of Media Content

1. What was the significance of ‘the party’ in Nineteen Eighty-Four?
2. What are the six main features of totalitarianism?
3. How important is the ‘cult of personality’ for totalitarian regimes?
4. What restrictions on freedom did totalitarian regimes impose?
5. What distinguished totalitarianism under Hitler from totalitarianism under Stalin?

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

[View discussion - Activity 6](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session7_Discussion1)

End of Activity

## Conclusion

In this free short course you have studied one of the key novels of the twentieth century. You have reflected on its longevity, the continuing relevance of its language, and reflected on its political context and consequences. We hope this has inspired an interest in Orwell and modern political ideas more widely.

You should now be able to:

* appreciate and recognise the distinctive language and terminology of Nineteen Eighty-Four
* understand the historical and political context of Orwell’s writing
* understand how political language, including concepts and ideas, is used
* appreciate the contemporary relevance of Orwell’s novel and the reasons for its enduring appeal.

This OpenLearn course is produced in association with The Open University course [DD316 Modern political ideas](https://www.open.ac.uk/courses/modules/dd316).

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## Further reading

Orwell wrote regularly for the Observer from 1942 until 1948. Orwell: The Observer Years (published in 2004 by Atlantic Books) is a selection of Orwell’s news reporting, book reviews and opinion pieces.

Orwell’s letters, essays and the full text of Homage to Catalonia, are brought together in a single volume Orwell in Spain (published in 2001 by Penguin Classics).

Orwell political writing including essays, and journalism and the full text of Animal Farm are brought together in a single volume Orwell and Politics (published in 2001 by Penguin Classics).

Orwell’s impressionistic account of working-class life in industrial Yorkshire and Lancashire, The Road to Wigan Pier was first published in 1937 and was re-published by Penguin Classics in 2001.

Orwell: The Life by DJ Taylor and George Orwell by George Bowker were both first published in 2003. Both authors provide a detailed account of Orwell’s time in Spain.

The Ministry of Truth by Dorian Lynskey was published in 2019. Lynskey’s focus is on Nineteen Eighty-Four. He explores Orwell’s motivations and influences and he explores the novel itself from a number of angles – and the novel’s enduring appeal.

## Acknowledgements

This free course was written by Susan Allen and Geoff Andrews. It was first published in July 2022.

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## Solutions

## Activity 1

#### Discussion

You may have come up with the following:

* The significance of his private school upbringing on developing suspicion of authority.
* His experience of fighting in the Spanish Civil War and suspicion of Russian communists he met.
* A critique of left-wing intellectuals for their political orthodoxies. In particular he was becoming suspicious of the power of political parties and the power of language. This is something he took into his later writing, notably Nineteen Eighty-Four.

[Back to - Activity 1](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session2_Activity1)

## Activity 2

#### Discussion

This is, of course, an example of how Orwell uses irony in the novel. Each of the four government ministries operates in a manner that is the direct opposite of what their names would imply. In the world of Nineteen Eighty-Four, however, 'reality' is what the totalitarian  state says it is.

[Back to - Activity 2](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session3_Activity1)

## Activity 3

### Part

#### Discussion

Even if you have not yet read Nineteen Eighty-Four, you will probably have come across the following words and phrases:

* Big Brother
* Room 101
* Thought Police
* Thought crime
* Newspeak
* Unperson
* Memory hole
* Doublethink
* Crimestop

[Back to - Part](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session5_Part1)

### Part

#### Discussion

On the one hand, the term ‘Orwellian’ is often used to describe an authoritarian dystopia – a repressive society which exercises total control. It may also be used to refer to the ways in which language may be used to manipulate and control people.

[Back to - Part](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session5_Part2)

## Activity 4

### Part

#### Discussion

Your date and place of birth; details of income for tax purposes; your medical records, driving records, and any criminal convictions you may have are just a few of the details that are held on central databases. You can be traced through the numbers on your driving licence or the number plates on your car. You can be traced through the numbers on your passport, your National Insurance cards, or your NHS medical cards.

All British passports issued in the last ten years include a microchip which holds biometric information that allows a machine at passport control to scan the passport and match data on it to enable facial recognition. More recently, the COVID-19 epidemic has raised the possibilities of people in the UK being issued with passports to prove their vaccination status.

Finally, if you are out and about, then your movements are often captured by CCTV.

[Back to - Part](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session6_Part1)

### Part

#### Discussion

In the UK, there are data protection laws. Many people would argue that the sort of personal data held by democratic states is necessary for effective law enforcement, the maintenance of public health and, more generally, to manage the complexities of modern society. Others, however, may express reservations that the huge amount of information held by the state poses a threat to individual freedom and the right to privacy.

However, even if people are relatively happy about the government holding so much of their personal information, they may not necessarily feel the same about the extent to which many the world’s biggest private companies (such as Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Google) hold such vast amounts of personal data – whether encrypted or not. Neither can it be assumed that big companies hold data securely. For example, in 2018, after a ‘whistle blower’ raised the alarm, the data analytics firm Cambridge Analytica (where the former Trump aide, Steve Bannon was a board member) was shown to have used personal data harvested (improperly) from Facebook in 2015 to target millions of US voters during the 2016 US presidential election (Cadwalladr, 2018).

[Back to - Part](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session6_Part2)

### Part

#### Discussion

Whenever you make online purchases, you are supplying a third party with your name, address, email address, phone number and bank details. If you have joined Facebook or another social media platform, you may post photographs, or details about where you have been and who you were with. It is reasonable to assume that Orwell be astonished at how easily many of us voluntarily surrender our personal data on a daily basis. And even if you think you are careful about protecting your personal information, you do not know the true extent to which big communications companies are handing over private data to the state or to other parties. In 2013, this was one of the issues Ed Snowden (the NSA ‘whistle blower’) drew attention to.

In Nineteen Eighty-Four, people’s lives are monitored by a ‘telescreen’. Many people have drawn an analogy between Orwell’s depiction of the telescreen and how smart phones are used in contemporary society. Of course, the comparison is not exact. Winston Smith was unable turn his telescreen off. We can, of course, switch our phones off. However, many of us rarely do so, because we have become so used to the instant communications that phones offer (whatever time of day or night). Many of us use our phones for instant messaging, to search for information online, for entertainment, to take and store photographs and so on. If your phone is switched on, it is also possible for you to track the movements of others – and for others to track your movements. Every time you use your phone, you are also (whether you choose to or not) providing data (of one sort or another) to a third party. Smart phones, then, have become ubiquitous in modern Britain. If you have used public transport in the last few years, you will probably have noticed that many of your fellow passengers spent at least part of the journey looking at their phones.

[Back to - Part](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session6_Part3)

## Activity 5

#### Discussion

In ‘The Prevention of Literature’, an essay written in 1946 when he was still formulating his ideas for Nineteen Eighty-Four, Orwell wrote the following:

Start of Quote

There is no such thing as a genuinely non-political literature, and least of all in an age like our own, when fears, hatreds, and loyalties of a directly political kind are near to the surface of everyone’s consciousness. Even a single tabu can have an all-round crippling effect upon the mind, because there is always the danger that any thought which is freely followed up may lead to a forbidden thought.

(Orwell, 1946, 1947)

End of Quote

[Back to - Activity 5](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session6_Activity2)

## Activity 6

#### Discussion

1. You will have seen that the Party was all-powerful in demanding conformity and orthodoxy and through the state was able to exercise control.
2. The six main features of totalitarianism are:
	1. an elaborate and totalising guiding ideology
	2. a single party committed to this ideology directing the state, typically led by a dictator
	3. the use of systemic terror and political violence, and the use of secret police
	4. the state possessing a total monopoly on the possession of weapons
	5. the state having a complete monopoly on the means of communication and the provision of information
	6. the state having central control and planning of the economy through state direction.
3. The ‘cult of personality’, including many myths of personal prowess and achievements, featured in both Nazi/fascist and communist examples of totalitarianism as a way of connecting leaders to the people.
4. You probably found that denial of free speech, the right to protest and of movement, or to criticise those in power were most common.
5. Left and right totalitarianisms had common features; for the right, ideas of racial superiority were often dominant; for the left, impositions on property featured. However, the role of the state and the party within it shared some core aspects.

[Back to - Activity 6](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session7_Activity1)

# Audio 1

## Transcript

GEOFF:

Thanks very much, Donna. And I guess it's appropriate that we're doing this session by telescreens. We’re delighted to discuss 1984 in the company of Orwell’s biographer. And I wanted to ask David, to start with, what was there in Orwell's early life in his schooling, family background that remains particularly influential for him, do you think, in the writing of 1984?

DAVID:

It's a very interesting question, and Orwell once said of the American writer Jack London, that he could foresee fascism because he had a fascist streak in himself. And although I wouldn't labour that point too prodigiously with regard to Orwell, we have to remember that he was effectively a son of the Raj, and his whole career was predicated on the idea of empire, imperial service. And we do know-- I think it is possible to say that he did have a kind of slight authoritarian streak that could only have been planted early on in his career.

But the key piece of evidence with regard, I think, to the impact of his early life on the writing, on the making of 1984 and the world it embodies is the famous essay "Such, Such Were The Joys," which is about his career at Cyprian's prep school, near Eastbourne, mostly during the years of the Great War. And it's a very odd piece of writing because we don't know when it was written. We only know that it was written sometime in the 1940s. It could have been written before 1984. It could have been written in conjunction with it. We just cannot date it.

And the thing about St Cyprian's, a boys’ preparatory school on the Sussex coast, is it is effectively presented as a totalitarian state, where the headmaster is the tyrant, the dictator and those-- and on several occasions, Orwell recasting his younger self says that if you went out to buy a packet of sweets, the headmaster's spies would be after you.

And the interesting thing about this is it works both ways in that when you come to read 1984, particularly the passages in which Winston is interrogated by O'Brien, a trap had been sprung on him, O'Brien is several times described as being rather like a headmaster, rather like a head or schoolmaster trying to encourage a promising but slightly wayward boy, this kind of thing. So I'd say it's impossible to draw a conclusive, definitive conclusion about that essay.

On the one hand, you could say that 1984 is the projection of Orwell's infant misery. On the other hand, you could say that when he started thinking about 1984, it encouraged him to recast his school days in a kind of totalitarian form. But there's obviously a relationship between those two pieces of writing. And together, they say something very profound, if not about the way in which Orwell's childhood actually happened, but the way in which he thought about that childhood and then how he projected it into the world in 1984.

GEOFF:

Yeah, and actually that generation of writers that he comes from-- Cyril Connolly being another one-- talk a lot about their early school life. And also, people who attended Gresham's school as well, that was obviously a formative experience for them, as it was for Orwell.

DAVID:

I think it was that to your average upper middle-class, upper-class schoolboy at around that time, going to school-- and though, obviously, Orwell didn't go there going to university-- was in some ways the most intense experience of your life. I mean, Connolly himself, Orwell's great friend, said that really after he'd been to Eton and got a scholarship to Oxford, his life was really downhill all the way. And it's interesting-- Orwell, of course, is a kind of different kettle of fish in that regard in that he frankly slacked through his days at Eton and then went off and joined the Burma police. So he sits rather to one side of that great contingent of early 20th century British intellectuals who never really got over their school days.

GEOFF:

Just moving on a bit, David, in your biography, you say that Orwell's time in Spain was a defining experience for him and indeed influenced his view of totalitarianism. Why was that?

DAVID:

One of the great questions about Orwell’s biography is the seed. When were the seeds sown of Orwell's political awakening? And it's always assumed that in some cases-- it's assumed that he came home from Burma in 1927 as a fully fledged anti-imperialist with all his political opinions in place. Now, I found a letter last year in a cache that's only just become available, written to a girlfriend in 1931 from London. Just at the point when the National government is forming, just at the point when we're going off the gold standard, crucial time in British history in the 1930s, and Orwell writes to his friend Eleanor and he says, there's probably going to be civil unrest, social unrest here in London in the autumn. But I don't really know anything about it because I know nothing of and I am not interested in politics. That was written in 1931.

Even when he goes to Wigan in 1936, and he begins-- he will write that Mr. So-and-so who I met, he said, is active in the labour movement, and it's almost anthropological. Orwell doesn't really know what the labour movement is, but he's concerned that he should investigate these curious people who are members of it. But it's when he gets to Spain, when he gets to revolutionary Barcelona in early 1937 that he suddenly sees, he imagined that he sees a society run on properly egalitarian lines. And it takes his breath away. And I think that it forms-- most notably, it's the crucible in which most of his later political opinions were forged.

GEOFF:

Yeah, and as you say, he wasn't, as in the case of [INAUDIBLE] or Cambridge University students, he wasn't converted to communism before he went. Was interested in socialism, but as you say, in a very loose way. How significant was that then in helping him to maintain a more critical independent position during and after Spain?

DAVID:

Well, as you say, he came to Spain not exactly cold because there is that long polemical second half of The Road to Wigan Pier, where he tries to work out what he thinks about socialism. But he came to say, and we know that the remarks that he vouchsafed to people in the week before he went to Spain, there were not in the least ideological. He was saying to people, terrible isn't about the Spaniards, something has to be done, poor chaps, we have to get over there and help – without really knowing how he was going to help or what the situation was.

And I think that the fact that he came to Spain with a relatively open mind and saw the sights that he saw in proto-revolutionary Barcelona in January 1937, it was that I think that helped him, that made him be so shocked six months later when the Soviet squads were at work in Barcelona, where he gets out, gets out with his life because he spent some-- I've just been rereading some of the essays he wrote about Spain subsequently and looking back on the Spanish war, essays like that. And he says that he still can't actually work out what the Russians were up to, and it was as if certainly we know that the Russians, the Soviet leadership thought that they didn't actually want a revolution in Spain in 1937, that it didn't serve their international purposes. And Orwell can't understand this because he'd seen what he regarded as conditions so far of social equality in a European country. And he thought that obviously it was the duty of everybody there to see that that position was maintained and enhanced.

He couldn't understand why anybody would want the Spanish revolution to fail, especially somebody on the left.

GEOFF:

You mentioned The Road to Wigan Pier, and, of course, in the second part of that book, he's very critical of left-wing intellectuals. He's critical of their, what he sees as their doctrinaire politics, the language they use, and contrasted that really with the experiences of ordinary citizens. And obviously, it was in an early writing on socialism on the left, although I think there were some themes he continued subsequently. But it was quite controversial at the time because, of course, the Spanish Civil War and '30s generally saw some of the great causes of the left.

And I was wondering, the later significance of this critique of intellectuals and how important that was in the work you did subsequently.

DAVID:

I think it's very important. And I think a lot of the work, a lot of the writings that he's doing at that point, both with Wigan Pier and the months and years after it, are in a certain sense-- you can see those later opinions coming to-- not coming to grip but beginning to incubate. As for the distaste for doctrinaire positions, either of left and right, only this morning, quite by chance, not actually in prep-- not prepping for this particular conversation, but I read a fascinating review that he wrote of a book called English Ways by Jack Hilton.

Now, Jack Hilton, as you doubtless know, was a very prominent distinguished working-class writer in the 1930s. He wrote another book called Caliban Shrieks, which is one of the great title for a proletarian autobiography. And English Ways is the story of a journey. In fact, it's The Road to Wigan Pier in reverse because Hilton and his wife start out at Epsom, and then they tramp all the way up to the North of England.

Orwell really liked this book, and he liked it because of the individualistic spirit that Hilton showed. And Orwell said he tries to define his political position. He says, Hilton is obviously a man of the left, but after you've said that, you realised that he's very idiosyncratic. And he likes having a bit of a flutter on the horses, and he loves it when he sees the King arriving at the Derby. And he's only disappointed that the King is in a motorcar and not in a coach and six.

And he says, and obviously from the point of view of the socialist intellectual, somebody like Jack Hilton is completely beyond the pale because he has no formal defined opinion. He will never nail his colours to any particular ideological mask and that he's an ordinary working man, and therefore, his opinion counts. And I think that you can see this view being developed. And obviously, Orwell's derision of the extreme Communist Party in the early years of the war who were dancing to a particular tune in 1939, 1940.

And as soon as Russia was at war with Germany had completely had a 180 degree turn and pretend they believed in something else. So I think you can see those ideas fermenting in the late 1930s.

[Back to - Audio 1](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session2_MediaContent1)

# Audio 2

## Transcript

GEOFF ANDREWS:

This is Geoff Andrews. I’m in Piccadilly at the offices of Drugstore Culture with Matthew d’Ancona, the Editor of Drugstore Culture and a columnist and journalist and the author of Post-Truth. Matt, can I start by asking you to define post-truth?

MATTHEW D’ANCONA:

Well I suppose the best definition of post-truth is as a phenomenon really where emotional response and emotional resonance matter more than facts and evidence in decision making and in political discourse. And that’s something really that’s arisen most obviously and most evidently in the years since 2016.

GEOFF ANDREWS:

And why 2016 in particular?

MATTHEW D’ANCONA:

Well 2016 was a massively important year because we had the, first of all, the vote on Brexit, which was very much charged by claims of emotional resonance about immigration, about the NHS and about the illusory prospects of Turkey joining the EU on the ‘Leave’ side and that really trumped ‘Remain’ whose arguments were very dry and very statistical. And the parallel to that was obviously President Trump’s very unexpected victory and I for one didn’t expect that to happen but what he managed to mobilise was what I would call a kind of brutal empathy. He had a genius at attributing blame, finding fault with others and for firing voters up without actually making policy prescriptions and it was essentially importing the values of show business into politics. He was up against arguably one of the most credentialed and qualified candidates in presidential electoral history in Hilary Clinton but that didn’t seem to matter. What mattered was the emotional connection he made with a sufficiency of people that leads to win the electoral college, and that was a milestone I think in this whole process.

GEOFF ANDREWS:

Some people might say there was some developments before 2016. I’m thinking, for example, of, well, the election of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy or Tony Blair’s defence of the Iraq war. But you’re saying there’s something fundamental in 2016 –

MATTHEW D’ANCONA:

Well I think 2016 was the dramatic culmination of a long process and I think you’re right to identify the Iraq dossiers as a fundamental moment. I think what we saw was in the first, say, fifteen years of the twenty-first century, a very dangerous and dramatic erosion of trust in traditional institutions. The Iraq dossiers were a very good example of that. So was the – obviously – the 2008/9 crash, which dramatically undercut trust in financial institutions. We saw the parliamentary expenses scandal. We saw the hacking scandal in the Press. The BBC had all sorts of difficulties and it seemed like dominoes that all the institutions that had, as it were, mediated trust were falling down. And I think that was a very important prelude to what happened in 2016. I think the other dramatic change was the development of digital technology. It’s extraordinary to reflect that Facebook was only invented in 2004 and yet it and other social media platforms have swept the world in a very short space of time, and also changed the way that we practise politics, and it has driven people into silos. The original promise of the web, to which I signed up, I freely admit, was that it would be a kind of political Nirvana, that borders would melt, that tribes would speak unto one another, that it would be a kind of great unifier. And I still think to some extent it has that capacity but what a lot of us missed I think is that it also encourages people to see more of the same, to look at more of the things that they already like and the algorithms beneath social media do that. They give you more of the things that already fit your preconceptions. So on the one hand you had institutional trust decaying at a rate of knots, and a brand new and extraordinary technology the government really wasn’t on top of driving people into their political silos, and this was a very, very rich and fertile terrain for a certain new kind of politics.

GEOFF ANDREWS:

So there are far-reaching consequences here for liberal democracies in general would you say?

MATTHEW D’ANCONA:

Huge, because liberal democracy essentially has been baked into institutions. Since the Second World War liberal democracy has found itself represented in a series of rule-based international and national structures, which we all are very familiar with and we all identify with. But what has emerged since the internet became almost the dominant force in the world is that everything is now part of a network or networks, plural, and liberal democracy has not yet found its place in that. It hasn’t yet found a way of being kinetic and forceful and expressing itself as a kind of vigour that, say, the populous right have, and this is a real problem because the basis of liberal democracy is we live in a pluralistic society in which various people have different incommensurable values, to use the old phrase, and they negotiate them using the institutions that are at hand. The digital world is one where anything goes and any voices can be amplified and the shrill voices tend to be amplified and re-tweeted the most. So the rules of the game have changed fundamentally and I think liberal democracy is struggling to keep pace with it. I think an allied problem is that we are now entering a world where a lot of people are of voting age who have not really seen liberal democracy at risk. So, I’m old enough to have lived through the end of the Cold War, not the Second World War but I remember vividly the battle between totalitarianism and the free West. A lot of people are grown up now who don’t remember that and have not seen liberal democracy imperilled and so for that generation it’s not obvious that this is something that’s – that’s necessarily precious, worth defending, vulnerable and I think that’s an added complexity to the problem.

GEOFF ANDREWS:

You mentioned populism and a lot of people would say that populism has been the doctrine that’s risen since the global crash of 2007/2008. What is the relationship between populism and post-truth, would you say?

MATTHEW D’ANCONA:

Well populism I define as not being popular but presenting or claiming that there are simple solutions to complex problems. So for example, you say America has a problem with illegal immigration. Let’s build a wall. You say that Britain has a series of difficulties. Let’s get out of the European union. These are big, broad brush strokes and because of their simplicity and their boldness they have natural appeal - the digital vectors that we now have make them easy to fire into people’s news feeds with great effect. That sort of populism has I think has – has had a tremendous surge, and I don’t think that the liberal democratic component of the political spectrum has really found a way of answering it – because by definition liberal democracy depends upon the recognition of complexity, because reality is complex.

GEOFF ANDREWS:

You mentioned the fall of the Berlin Wall and different generations having different political experiences and coming into politics in different ways. But I was wondering why people are still reading ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’, George Orwell’s dystopian novel and some for example have made connections between what sometimes happens on social media on Twitter, echo chambers, and some of the language that is used in Big Brother. I wonder if that analogy works for you?

MATTHEW D’ANCONA:

Well I always tell undergraduates or people at school who are studying ‘A’ Level Politics, who ask what the best book to read on politics to start with ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’ because for me it is still the definitive text. It seems timeless. And there’s a lot in it that’s almost uncannily resonant at the moment. I mean, if you recall when Winston is being interrogated and tortured by O’Brien, O’Brien makes the point that there is no such independent thing as reality. It is what he says it is. If he says two plus two equals five – it does. And he can force anyone to believe anything so I think that that resonates in the current environment which is, you know, the slightly softer version of that is the Trump idea of alternative facts. You know – if you don’t like this fact you get some alternative ones. An interesting twist to the ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’ story is that the one thing I think Orwell got wrong was he said that repressive regimes would keep technology down. In the middle of the novel when Winston’s reading the Emmanuel Goldstein book, there’s a section about how it was very important to the New Order to keep technology very, very much under control but in fact what you seeing is a much more complex interaction between the autocracies and the manipulation of technology. And its very striking how quickly the Russians saw the potential for this new technology to be useful in what the KGB used to call ‘active measures’. As early as the 1990s even just after Yeltsin people on the Russian side were starting to build up what became known as ‘hacker farms’ you know waves of cyber attack, long before the West and so I think that that use of technology that the information warfare of the twenty-first century, has been you know an extremely important part of all this.

GEOFF ANDREWS:

Just wondering what post-truth means for the future of political parties which have traditionally drawn on political ideologies or philosophies to some extent. Does post-truth mean the end of ideology? I know we have been there in the past.

MATTHEW D’ANCONA:

I think what post-truth has done is, as it were, undercut the tectonic plates beneath ideology and make it possible to say almost anything. You see this very much in – in the way the Right describes Brexit; that now all of a sudden we have Jacob Rees-Mogg saying that the test of Brexit success will be fifty years after the vote in 2016 whereas in the campaign we were repeatedly told this was going to be a light-switch solution to all of Britain’s problems. And so I think you’ll have continued statements of ideological fixity and certainty. I don’t think that will change. But they will actually be underpinned by a complete mobility and what I think Trump represents more than anything is the complete vacuity of conviction. I mean I genuinely think Trump would do or say anything that he thought would be in his interests. And the evidence to date is that that is exactly what he will do.

GEOFF ANDREWS:

You a political columnist, Editor of Drugstore Culture. What does post-truth mean for you as a writer and journalist?

MATTHEW D’ANCONA:

Well obviously it’s a huge threat. It was not a battle I anticipated that we would have to fight because I took it perhaps too complacently as a – as an orthodoxy that we are all at least committed to the truth even if we didn’t necessarily agree on what it was. But that has gone. Or at least it is imperilled and so I think more than ever the political commentator must be absolutely ruthlessly and uncompromisingly committed to finding out first of all what the facts of the matter are, and this is why I’m a big fan of the fact-checking organisations of liberalism, like Full Fact, because I think that they are trying to come up with some solutions to what we can do practically about this; and I think that it’s, you know, the commentators generally should be supportive of this. But what I think you have to be constantly aware of as a commentator is that it’s no longer enough simply to asset the fact; you have to realise that we are now engaged in a battle of narratives, and therefore the way that you present the evidence is almost as important as the evidence itself. The challenge has never been greater. I find myself quite surprised by the scale of the task. I am absolutely up for it, but it’s not a battle that I expected to engaged in at this stage. I think that the truth of the matter is if one is honest that the so-called commentariat or the liberal elite or whatever you want to call it, did become a bit complacent actually and did take it for granted that their categories, their assumptions, their orthodoxies about the merits of globalisation, the proper role of state, the wage gap, social integration, automation, a whole list of issues were pretty much set in stone and that of course is not the case at all. We live in a world of pulverising change and we have to be more nimble and agile than ever before. And I think the one good thing to come out of some very difficult and turbulent times is that it has been a wake up call. I think a lot of people involved in column writing have without believing that they should appease bigotry which absolutely they shouldn’t, have perhaps expanded their horizons a little and gone back to first principles and asked what it is they are actually trying to do and more than anything what their job is because that’s the key. What’s the job? The job is to provide good, well sourced, well-reasoned and useful analysis for people in a civic culture. I mean that’s the job.

GEOFF ANDREWS:

And how’s your job as a journalist changed over the last fifteen or twenty years?

MATTHEW D’ANCONA:

I think it’s broadened in scope. I started as a trainee on The Times in 1991 and here we are in 2018. When I started the world was absolutely a world of institutions: parliament, parties, party conferences. That was how the world worked. You knew that here was the legislature, here was the executive, here was the civil service, here was number ten. Everything inter-linked very smoothly and you could identify the point on the chessboard where everything was happening. That’s no longer true. To use the rather wonderful image by Eric S. Raymond, who was a coder, who wrote a book about the New Society – quite a prophetic one, called The Cathedral and the Bazaar –we’ve moved from the cathedral of hierarchy and institutions to the bazaar of a flattened democratic digital world in which you have to be very wily to know where the nodes of power are. And that’s – again, that’s the job. The job has changed. Jobs do change. And it’s lazy to assume otherwise. After all, surgeons have to constantly update their knowledge on the basis of advances in medical technology; why should journalistic commentators be any different?

GEOFF ANDREWS:

And finally you mentioned the liberal elite. I was just wondering; you know, the Brexit fifty two per cent and Trump supporters, whether they think all this post-truth is really an attempt by the liberal elite to escape from the realities?

MATTHEW D’ANCONA:

I’m sure they do. I mean there’s a cringe sometimes by members of the so-called liberal elite, which is we mustn’t upset the fifty two per cent – or, on the other side of the Atlantic, Trump voters. Well I don’t care about upsetting them; my job is to get to the facts of the matter and I’m sorry some people find the post-truth portmanteau word upsetting. I have no desire to upset anyone, but it’s not gonna stop me in my endeavours. And I also think that – and I also think that post-truth is useful because it’s not actually about the Right or the Left. It’s about how will we get at the truth of the matter and how we move beyond a situation where a basic enlightenment value of truth is imperilled. Now I think every one who thinks for more than two minutes realises that it’s in everyone’s interests that we cling on to some notion of reality. I don’t think it’s a liberal – exclusively a liberal task and indeed one of the interesting things is that a lot of the people who are engaged in this are people who have been, you know, associated with the Right. I mean, David Frum from America, clearly a Conservative but would sign up, I suspect, to most of the things we have been discussing. So I don’t actually see it as a Liberal versus Conservative battle. I think the populist right have been conspicuously the first beneficiaries of the post-truth era but there is no intrinsic reason why it should be the populist right. It could be – it could just as easily be a populist left movement with very strong claims about the ability of the state to transform people’s lives overnight. I mean this is entirely possible.

GEOFF ANDREWS:

Thank you Matt.

MATTHEW D’ANCONA:

Pleasure.

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# Audio 3

## Transcript

NARRATOR:

In his magisterial novel, 1984, a dystopian, terrifying glimpse into a totalitarian future, George Orwell observed that the clocks struck thirteen… So powerful was the party, led by Big Brother, it could control the measurement of time itself. The party, Orwell famously suggested, controlled both the present and the past, something which enabled it to control the future.

The party also controlled truth. Orwell wrote, and I quote:

‘In the end the Party would announce that two and two made five, and you would have to believe it. It was inevitable that they should make that claim sooner or later: the logic of their position demanded it. Not merely the validity of experience, but the very existence of external reality was tacitly denied by their philosophy.’ End of quote.

This Orwellian future was summed up in the chilling phrase, and I quote:

‘If you want a vision of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – forever’.

Orwell’s vision of the future built upon recent reality when publishing the book in 1949. It owed much to the experiences of the recent past of Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia.

The notion of totalitarianism is not, however, the creation of a novelist. Nor is the word totalitarian a simple insult. Totalitarianism is instead a historically rooted descriptive concept describing a regime which, among other things, took and ruined the lives of numerous people in the service of the ideology of the state and the interest of the political elite. The price of totalitarianism is written in blood in the history books, with Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia being exemplars. The horrors enacted by those two regimes, replicated later in Mao’s China, reinforced by the bloodbath of the Second World War, saw such states persecute, then liquidate, numerous numbers of its citizenry in the interest of rebuilding the world in their preferred perfect ‘utopian’ vision.

Friedrich and Brzezinski established a theory of totalitarianism applicable to the study of comparative politics. They set out the principal characteristics of the totalitarian regime by offering the following checklist of traits and characteristics:

First, an elaborate and totalising guiding ideology.

Second, a single party committed to this ideology directing the state, typically led by a dictator.

Third, the use of systemic terror and political violence, and the use of secret police.

Fourth, the state possessing a total monopoly on the possession of weapons.

Fifth, the state having a complete monopoly on the means of communication and the provision of information; and

Sixth, the state having central control and planning of the economy through state direction.

Totalitarianism, Simon Tormey rightly suggests, was, and I quote, ‘the modern incarnation of an ancient political form, the autocracy’: end of quote. It was the sum of these parts. Foremost amongst these characteristics, however, was the totalising ideology, the vision of the future society the regime wished to construct. It was the end to which all necessary violent means were directed. Terror and violence were the means by which everyone and everything was changed, the old society swept away, and, in time, the new society defended. People were expendable. Resistance had to be futile. In time, however, the public, endlessly manipulated and deceived, would come to accept the new order. Resistance would not be possible. Nor, in fact, would it be necessary, because all aspects of human existence and public interaction would be organised by the state.

Totalitarian regimes made much of the cult of personality. The historian Ian Kershaw said of Nazi Germany that everyone in the state worked towards Hitler. The leader was infallible, and could not be corrected. And if the leader was a megalomaniac, was suspicious and paranoid, all the better for the totalitarian regime.

These regimes professed a radical ideology and sought all necessary means to enact it. They posited a golden age and they looked forward to what they believed would be a glorious future.

The chosen ideology – communism under Stalin, or Nazism under Hitler – had to monopolise the public realm and dominate the private sphere. No alternative perspective was possible; nor could any be permitted. Dissent, in any form, would challenge the totalitarian ruler, so it must be suppressed and it had to be eliminated. Thus, for Hannah Arendt, and I quote: ‘the confrontation between what is and what must be makes necessary the use of terror in totalitarian systems’. End of quote. Terror is therefore a classic feature of the totalitarian regime.

Within Hitler’s Third Reich, before the outbreak of war, the Nazis controlled Germany with a rod of iron. For the historian Richard Evans, in the Third Reich, and I quote:

‘It was illegal to belong to any political grouping apart from the Nazi party or indeed any non–Nazi organisation of any kind apart from the churches (and their ancillary lay organisations) and the army: it was illegal to tell jokes about Hitler; it was illegal to spread rumours about the government; it was illegal to discuss alternatives to the status quo. The Reichstag Fire Decree of the 28th of February 1933 made it legal for the police to open letters and tap telephones, and to detain people indefinitely and without a court order on so called ‘protective custody’. Political opponents were banned, and political dissent crushed. These same decrees also abrogated the clauses in the Weimar Constitution that guaranteed freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of association and freedom of expression.’ End quote.

From these restrictions of freedom followed the incarceration of political opponents in concentration camps, the war on the Jews and, in time, amid the horror of war, the obscenity of the extermination camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bełżec, Chełmno, Majdanek, Sobibor, and Treblinka.

Hitler’s Germany was responsible for the murder of some six million Jews and 19 million prisoners of war and civilians between 1939 and 45. Across Europe an estimated 36.5 million people were killed in the wars that Hitler prosecuted. Stalin’s Russia, unlike Hitler’s Germany, was not based upon any ideology of racial superiority, but supposedly upon a collective brotherhood of man. But Stalin’s rule saw terror enacted on an unimaginable scale.

Before the war, on a greater level than the Nazis, Stalin terrorised the people, and also terrorised the elites. His Great Terror, the purges of 1937 to 38, saw some 1.7 million people arrested, 800,000 people shot as ‘enemies of the state’. Earlier, in 1932–33, the famine the Soviets deliberately inflicted on the Ukraine led to some 3.3 million peasants being starved to death.

In the Soviet penal system, some three million people perished between 1929 and 1953, and in the life of the Soviet Union between 1917 and 1991 some 28.7 million people were forced into labour. Millions of others were cast into darkness.

Under Stalin, key members of the Soviet leadership were executed. Of the 139 members of the central committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in post in 1934, some 98 were killed in 1938 and 1940.

The subjugation of some knew no bounds. Stalin’s Great Terror saw thousands of communists accept that their death was a final service to their communist party. One Bolshevik, Georgy Pyatakov, himself killed under Stalin, had denounced his wife as a traitor and saboteur, unsuccessfully offered to appear as a witness in her prosecution, and volunteered to personally administer her execution. Others, usually under torture, confessed to crimes they had never committed. For the elite, such was the totalitarian nature of their regime, the party was their life, and their commitment to its ideology total. This fact served to mask all manner of crimes.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, when publishing The Gulag Archipelago, unmasked the reality that the concentration camps of the Soviet Union were not an incidental feature of the communist regime, but an integral part of it. And that had been from the very beginnings of the revolution. ‘With an iron fist’, a sign at one Soviet gulag read, ‘we will lead humanity to happiness’. A claim echoing the grotesque lie adorning the gates of the labour and extermination camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Arbeit Macht Frei: work makes you free.

These two totalitarian regimes cast the deepest, that of Starlin and that of Hitler, casts the darkest shadows over humanity in a twentieth century in which globally some 190 million people met their death by war, massacre, execution or by famine. Understanding totalitarianism is one way its threat can be combated.

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# Figure 1 Ninteen Eighty-Four was first published in 1949

## Description

Close up of the book cover of George Orwell’s 1984.

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# Figure 2 George Orwell (1903–1950)

## Description

Black and white photo of George Orwell

[Back to - Figure 2 George Orwell (1903–1950)](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session2_Figure1)

# Figure 3 ‘Big Brother is watching you’

## Description

Electronic eye representing a Big Brother concept

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# Figure 4 In Nineteen Eighty-Four, Orwell foreshadowed some of the issues that we now face in contemporay society

## Description

Person holding a banner at a demonstration with a drawing of George Orwell holding 1984. The banner reads ‘I told you so’

[Back to - Figure 4 In Nineteen Eighty-Four, Orwell foreshadowed some of the issues that we now face in contemporay society](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session6_Figure1)

# Figure 5 Surveillance is a key theme in Nineteen Eighty-Four

## Description

A woman on her phone in a digital matrix environment

[Back to - Figure 5 Surveillance is a key theme in Nineteen Eighty-Four](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session6_Figure2)

# Figure 6 In Nineteen Eighty-Four people are not free to speak out or even to think certain thoughts

## Description

Three black and white faces each with a red cross over their mouths.

[Back to - Figure 6 In Nineteen Eighty-Four people are not free to speak out or even to think certain thoughts](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session6_Figure3)

# Figure 7 Today’s use of social media enables the spread of fake news

## Description

Three circles with social media icons appearing from the centre circle.

[Back to - Figure 7 Today’s use of social media enables the spread of fake news](%22%20%5Cl%20%22Session6_Figure4)