SOC 205
Orwell Paper

Part One: Information Control in Orwell's 1984

George Orwell's book 1984 is riddled with social problems. It is full of techniques that the Party uses to control the people, the most problematic of which is information control. The way in which the Party uses information to persuade and manipulate the common people is so embedded in their society that it would be almost impossible for someone to fix the issue. To fully analyze the issue, we have to ask several questions.

First, what are the negative consequences? What is the actual problem? Well, government in 1984 had total control of the information that was released, not only to the general public, but to the party members as well. Winston's job was in what was called the "Ministry of Truth", the section of the government that controlled everything that ever had or would be printed. His job was essentially rewriting history. The government rewrote history to serve their own purposes and to make it impossible to verify anything. It is explained well in the book. "Not a word of it could ever be proved or disproved. The Party claimed, for example, that today 40 per cent of adult proles were literate: before the Revolution, it was said, the number had only been 15 per cent. The Party claimed that the infant mortality rate was now only 160 per thousand, whereas before the Revolution it had been 300 – and so it went on. It was like a single equation with two unknowns. It might very well be that literally every word in the history books, even the things that one accepted without question, was pure fantasy" (Orwell, 74.) The problem with information control is that it keeps the people from knowing the reality of their situation, and therefore making them unable to change it or to challenge anything the government does.

It is a social problem because information control affected the biggest social group: the
commoners, or the proles as they are called in the book. These people knew only what they were told. Winston and other outer party members had an advantage, if you could call it that, of at least knowing that the Party was in complete control of what they were seeing. Yes, but because they knew that, they were also targets to most of the heavy-handed surveillance, propaganda, and threats of torture. Most party members chose to ignore this fact and to think of it as being for the good of the party, which they viewed as always right because of manipulation tactics. The cause in this case is obvious. It is caused by the Party and its desire for complete and total control of the thoughts and actions of its people.

What are the consequences? To begin with, it puts the proles into a state of submission. They are never conscious of a problem. Orwell said it best when he said “Until they became conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious” (Orwell, 70.) In addition to controlling the proles, it also keeps the Party members in check. Those who are aware of the power the Party has to control information are reminded on a daily basis of how easy it would be for the Party to simply write them out of history and pretend they didn't exist. No one would ever know the difference. The inner Party members are the only people who stand to benefit from the complete control of information. By deciding what information will be given to the public, they are securing their own power and dominance over the proles for the foreseeable future. In most cases, the media is the outlet used to frame social problems. Whoever controls the media controls the way people view an issue. In this case, since the control of the media is the issue, the Party is framing the issue by not admitting that it exists.

Now for the hard part. Who should fix this problem, and how? The right thing would be for the Party to stop erasing history, start telling the truth, and let people be informed and make their own decisions. However, that doesn't seem likely to happen since it would be against all of their interests. Another option would be for the proles to fix things themselves, to rebel. There are a few of them who
still have some memory of things as they were, who know that the information they are getting isn’t always correct. Winston says it many times: “If there is hope.... it lies in the proles” (Orwell, 69.)

However, the lack of consciousness created by the lack of information makes this a near impossibility.

What would happen to the society if the proles staged a work stoppage (recognizing even that might be difficult to organize)?

Part Two: 1984 in 2010?

In 2003, Dennis Roddy wrote an article for post-gazette.com about the Republican National Committee sending out letters to the editor in small newspapers all over the country in the name of interested citizens. The group had given website viewers the option of sending a pre-composed letter to their hometown newspapers instead of writing their own. All they had to do was put in their zip code. Editors of the newspapers picked up these letters because they seemed genuine, were fairly short, and full of numbers that made them look accurate and informed. While not as extreme as what we see in 1984, this is a form of information control. By sending out the same letter in mass and claiming it to be the words of an ordinary citizen, people are getting information from a source much more biased than they believe they are. Good point. The 3rd party technique…

Richard Garner tells us of a time when the British Ministry of Defense tried to rewrite history. As recently as 2008, the Ministry of Defense was providing biased lesson plans for teachers about the war in Iraq. According to the article, the worksheets and information for students stressed the reconstruction of Iraq and mentioned the number of schools and hospitals that had been rebuilt. It failed to mention that any civilian casualties had occurred. The teachers union called the Ministry of Defense out on the propaganda-like attributes of the information and claimed it violated a law on education which required that information on politics be factual and balanced. This incident brings to mind a part
of the book 1984, when Winston is questioning an old man in a pub. He says “You can remember what it was like in the old days, before the Revolution. People of my age don't really know anything about those times. We can only read about them in books, and what it says in the books may not be true” (Orwell, 89.) If the government educates children that the past, our present, was different than what actually happened, that is what they will grow up believing. By manipulating the information the children get in school, history will eventually be rewritten into something almost unrecognizable. What kind of history to kids get in public schools? Uncritical patriotism?

According to the Washington Post, the pentagon had a portion of an interview with Donald Rumsfeld deleted. In this interview, Rumsfeld and author Bob Woodward had discussed a comment Rumsfeld allegedly made to the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the US. Rumsfeld had told Prince Bandar bin Sultan that there would most definitely be an invasion of Iraq before an official statement had been released. Rumsfeld claims that the omissions were “some banter” and implied that they were off topic and had no relevance. The fact that the US government is censoring things that should be in public record, the fact that they are attempting to cover up something that might make a public official look bad, is reminiscent of something the Party would do in 1984. The Party was constantly removing people, events, or statements from public record. In fact, the only things on public record were the things that the Party actually wanted people to know. So the difference is a matter of degree? Bush once said it would all be a lot easier if it weren’t a democracy.

So, do these incidents represent a social problem similar to the issue of information control in Orwell's 1984? Let's start at the beginning. Is what is essentially propaganda and censorship a problem? Yes. It affects everyone who reads or watches the news. When normal civilians aren't aware of the truth of what's going on, especially in regard to things that affect them, they are more likely to be controlled by the people in charge of the media. People are more easily manipulated when they believe that lies are truth. If they can be convinced of the little things, such as the war in Iraq being a reconstruction project...
as opposed to killing many civilians, they can eventually be convinced to believe bigger things that could lead to the downfall of the democracy. It affects huge numbers of people. As in Orwell's book, it affects everyone not directly involved in the inner workings of the government.

Idealistically, I would say that this is caused by the government's desire to be loved and trusted by the people. If the American people believe that Rumsfeld didn't know the war was going to happen until just before they did, they are less likely to feel that they are being manipulated or are uninformed. If they believe that the war in Iraq was done with good intentions, or that their neighbors really do love George Bush, they are much more likely to feel that the government wants what's best for them. In reality, it could be caused by hunger for control just as much as it is in 1984. The consequence of information control, even on a smaller scale, is an uninformed public who doesn't know the truth and therefore are unable to revolt if the need should arise to do so. If the public can be blinded to the real actions and intentions of the government, if they can be tricked into believing that everything is done with their best interest at heart, they will follow blindly. Also, as journalism is censored and teachers are told what to teach, those professions become less genuine. Teachers are no longer allowed to make a difference in the lives of children by telling them truth. Instead, they are told what they can and cannot tell the children. Journalists are no longer allowed to change the world with their words and reports.

Well at least those that work for commercial outlets with financial pressures that focus most of their efforts on keeping ratings high and consistent. They are censored and sometimes forced to give false information. In the US and Britain, this is only happening in minor ways, but 1984 shows us what it could become. And if people don’t really seem to notice or mind, well, what’s the biggie?

The government benefits from the manipulation of information, as do the heads of the companies who sell the news. They might be paid by the government to keep quiet about the information they are asked to hide or change, or they might be promised that their representatives will vote in their interests as opposed to the interests of the majority of their constituents. This problem is
definitely framed by the government and the media. In the case of Rumsfeld's omitted comment, the Pentagon had the ability to block out as much information about it as possible. Rumsfeld was able to get press time to talk about what was omitted and claim it was unimportant. Something I noticed about the articles on information control is that most of them were not printed in the mainstream news.

Good catch. Somehow, the government keeps the mass media quiet about these situations and can fight claims of censorship by letting them be printed in smaller, more inconspicuous news sources.

As in 1984, I think the responsibility to change this issue of information control lies with the government. However, I still believe that the only people who will do something are the commoners. We are still at a point where we can change things. We are not so blinded by what the government and media tell us that we cannot recognize when we are being manipulated, at least in obvious cases such as the ones discussed in the news articles. This is true. But people would have to care as well. Perhaps the best forms of social control are those that are cheap, maybe even profitable, like shopping, television, legal drugs like alcohol and tobacco, etc.?

Orwell provided a very extreme example of things that we are dealing with today. He showed us what could be while we still have time to stop it. I don't think the US will ever become like Oceania. It definitely won't happen in my lifetime. The issues are there, though. Are we content with being controlled by the information we're given? Or are we going to do something about it while we still have time?

Nice job, well-written, clear, followed that 1-2-3 formula that for some reason many students resist in this class, and you made insightful points along the way.

Sources


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