



Is cyberspace becoming 1984's Oceania?

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Abstract

Language, being a dynamic system, keep changing with the passage of time, with the addition of new words, new meaning being associated with existing words, words falling out of usage, and so on. Shakespearean English is different from modern standard English. Usually, the process of changes and adaptation in a language is uniform and gradual. But, at times, certain literary artefacts or revolutionary technology affects the language somewhat more than usual gradual. Effects affected by George Orwell's 1984 and social media technology may be seen in this light.

The arrival of a plethora of social media services that enable real-time communication through multiple media elements has resulted in the evolution of the written language, especially within the English language – considering the fact that English is currently the most dominant language on the internet. Various new forms of the language within social media have resulted in a cross-cultural mesh, almost creating a new type of 'Pidgin' (a grammatically simplified means of communication allowing the ease of communication between two groups of people who do not speak the same language, commonly employed within situations such as trade).

This article compares the freedom of speech and expression, surveillance practices and evolution of Newspeak in 1984's Oceania to the corresponding phenomenon prevailing in today's cyberworld.

Keywords: Oceania, cyberspace, social media technology

Introduction

Those of us who have read George Orwell's 1984 before the onslaught of social media in our lives, may recall some casual similarities between Big Brother and today's surveillance states and social media Big Techs' overwatch in our lives. But, a critical reread today, will show striking similarities to today's cyberspace, for social media and other apps, akin to 1984's telescreens and microphones, make people to change their overt behaviour. In 1984, Party members, both Inner and Outer, are forced to change their visible behaviour lest they want to get in trouble with Big Brother. In today's real world and cyber world, the same individual dons two different mantles. S(he) may be an easy-going person in real physical world whereas the same individual may be operating a verified or fake social media account involved in spewing hate speech based on race, caste (in South Asian/Indian context), religion, or gender. Just like the telescreens are capable of sensing the slightest of physiological change in the human body, location feature of smartphones keeps tracks of slightest of the movement of person bearing it. Like the Party members are not allowed to switch off the telescreens, some mobile apps require that location feature of the smartphone be kept on lest you want the app not working. Like the Thought Police were able to detect even the thought crime committed by the Party members, the Big Techs can snoop its users' movements, interests, political ideologies, sexual orientation, fashion statement and so on.

In 1984, therefore, Party members feign their actions and emotions. the suggestion of abnormality, of having something to hide. is itself a punishable offense (Orwell, 65). Present day social media platforms comes very handy to capture one's inner essence, thoughts and feelings and show them to the whole world. Posting anything on these platforms is subject to *N* number of interpretations and

consequential backlashes. If you post something context-free, social media community is free to attribute it any context and respond accordingly. Event, the out-of-context replies of posts and tweets are abundant. A case in point is the tweet of a woman named Justine Sacco, "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!" This tweet went viral and the whole episode snowballed into a big controversy. Resultantly, she lost her job and was even scared to step outside her home. Social media behaviour, like any other public platform, has to face public scrutiny and therefore social media users have to be careful about the intent and contents of their tweets and posts.

Winston, in 1984, while trying to find a private place, to be with Julia, devoid of surveillance gadget like telescreens and microphones, observes, "There were no telescreens, of course, but there was always the danger of concealed microphones by which your voice might be picked up and recognized" (Orwell, 128). Throughout 1984, the possibility of technology-supported surveillance in Oceania comes to fore. Citizens are afraid of airing their opinions or discussing politics. Although, in present day cyberworld, the users are restricted to discuss or air their opinions, but they know that every action of theirs is being watched and recorded.

Social media giants' overwatch and big brother

Big Brother of George Orwell's magnum opus 1984 has had a metaphorical rebirth in the new millennium as Big Techs like Meta, Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, and Microsoft and with it also came to life metaphorical telescreens in the name of smartphones. In 1984, the Party and Big Brother decided what to show on the telescreens, today, the Social Media Giants' algorithms decide our view list and also shape our worldview. Today mass media in general and social media, in particular, is monitoring and controlling our actions in the real and virtual world.

Social media surveillance reduces individuals' control over their personal information in favour of social media houses or the state machinery. Social media services allow individuals to share their friends' information even without their consent. This may have a "chilling effect" on social media users' whistle-blowing and democratic activism (Fuchs, 2015) ^[3]. Apart from social media companies, governments all over the world are not left behind in assuming Big Brother's role and use surveillance tools like Pegasus to snoop on its citizen. Governments of all types – from democracies to socialists to communists to monarchies to autocracies - actively work to turn one or more aspects of dystopian fiction into a reality.

A reread of 1984 after the onslaught of social media on human life will be an altogether new experience and the re-reader is bound to strike more resemblance between the 1984 entities like Oceania, the Party, the Ingsoc, the Big Brother and today's polity, governments, their surveillance machinery and social media biggies (Lynskey, 2019) ^[4].

Cyber volunteers in India and the junior spies

The Junior Spies - another state instrument of Oceania - is a state wing working to brainwash its youth and induct them into the Party's ideology wherein teen girls and boys spy upon their parents and neighbours for reporting any suspicious anti-state activity – be it verbal, physical, or metal. These volunteers are brainwashed to believe Big Brother and partake in activities promoting blind faith in the Party, Big Brother and the values of Ingsoc. The spies also act as an extension of the Thought Police, and children are encouraged to carefully monitor their parents and report them for suspicious anti-government activity.

In a striking resemblance, a December 2019 video during the anti-CAA protests went viral wherein some children were seen wearing the caps of a political party and chanting slogans "Desh ke gaddaro ko, goli maaro saalo ko!" and "Aatankwaad ki kya pehchaan? Mulla, Masjid, Pakistan!" Such a deep and institutional hatred oozing out of young persons should set the alarm bell ringing for the powers that be (Sen 2020) ^[5].

The members of the Junior Spies are transformed into zealous, violent Party supporters who are fiercely loyal to Big Brother. The Parsons children are both members of the Junior Spies, and Winston Smith can tell that Mrs. Parsons is scared of them. Mrs. Parsons's son ironically accuses Winston of being a thought criminal and fires his slingshot at him as he leaves their apartment. Later in the story, the Parsons children turn their father in to the authorities for saying, "Down with Big Brother" in his sleep. The Junior Spies organization is one method of ensuring the Party's complete control over the population and solidifying its reign for future generations.

In light of the Junior Spies of 1984 decipher the Cyber Crime Volunteers Concept launched by the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in February of 2021. MHA's Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre seeks to register ordinary Indian citizens as Cyber Crime Volunteers to help identify the circulation of digital "unlawful content". The

initiative seeks good Samaritans' to assume the role of Unlawful Content Flaggers on digital platforms and help law enforcement agencies in identifying, report and removal of illegal/unlawful online content. Volunteers are, however, advised to study Article 19 of the Indian Constitution which governs freedom of expression.

Having registered under one of three categories, namely, Cyber Volunteer Unlawful Content Flagger, Cyber Awareness Promoter and Cyber Expert, the volunteer can directly report "unlawful content" being circulated over the Internet including social media services such as Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram etc. Further, the cyber volunteer programme seeks to identify and report the "unlawful content" which may be labelled in broad categories, namely, the content infringing upon the public order, communal harmony, sovereignty, integrity, defence, and security of the State; friendly relations with foreign states and child sex abuse.

The programme seeks the red-flagging of objectionable digital content to be performed by untrained and non-specialist common citizens, thereby placing the social media users at the risk of unofficial surveillance resulting in a cascading 'chilling effect' on the exercise of very Article 19 of the Constitution of India (freedom of speech and expression) which the programme advises the cyber volunteers to study (and observe).

Social media and two minutes hate

In 1984, towards the beginning of the novel, Winston attends a daily ritual called *Two Minutes Hate* at the Ministry of Truth where he works in the Records Department. It's a routine emotional release designed to keep everyone afraid to the brim and enraged at Emmanuel Goldstein, a great enemy of Big Brother and former Party leader now heading an underground outfit engaged in an attempt to overthrow the Party.

To partake in the ritual of Two Minutes Hate, people interrupt their activities each day and stand in front of their telescreens to flame enemies and celebrate Big Brother. The enemies of the State change regularly, but the Saviour –Big Brother - doesn't. The ritual is orchestrated by the Inner Party to keep the hate and emotions of the Outer Party on a constant boil. The Outer Party members were obliged to partake in the act and strangely enough one need not pretend within half a minute into the ritual. A gruesome state of trance and malevolence, a desire to torture and kill, seemed to invigorate the participants, as much as they start behaving like lunatics against their will. Orwell, with *Two Minutes Hate*, revealed how people's train of thoughts, emotions, and ultimately their acts can be controlled.

Orwell's succinct description of subtleties and dynamics of human behaviour through *Two Minutes Hate* finds a very near match in the online behaviours of social media users. WhatsApp Groups, Facebook Pages and Twitter Handles are amply engaged in spreading slurs against castes, gender, and religions. At times, individuals and groups on social media even target the constitutional provision of affirmative actions of the State like the reservation.



Fig 1: A screenshot of a fake news post targeted against reservation

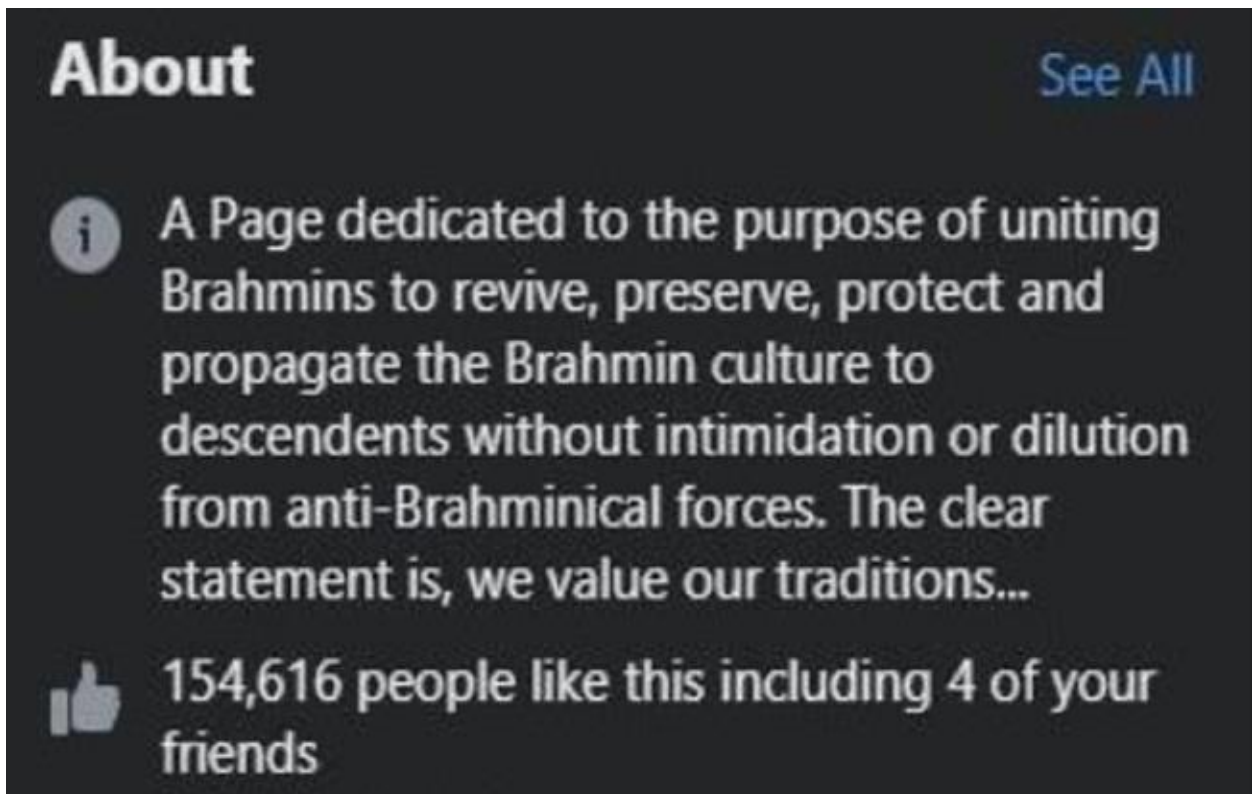


Fig 2: Description of Facebook Page 'dedicated' to a particular social order

It is common that fake accounts are involved in the seeding and initial spread of hoax posts and provocative hashtags until they are picked up by real accounts/handles, and become trends and mainstream. The number of hate-speaking and propagandist online entities indulging in racist, casteist and misogynist memes is on the rise. Social media platforms, in the name of freedom of speech, not just

enabled these slurs, but empower them with an array of tools to design and create such media. It is the pseudo-anonymity of the Internet-based media and a gross lack of understanding about social media etiquettes that, at times, you feel compelled to react to a situation/event that might be unreal or might have been portrayed otherwise or you might not know full facts of it,

just to wake up midnight or next morning thinking “How possibly could I have done that?” Further, fuelled by a euphoric online or offline situation, did you ever indulge in posting, retweeting, or liking an artefact with a potentially inflammatory title or content (like the one shown in Fig. 1) without actually reading it? Or, have you ever subscribed to social media page like the one shown in Fig. 2? If your answer to either of the above questions is a YES, you’ve partaken in a social media variant of 1984’s Two Minutes Hate.

The universe of social media offers a situation that is piquant on two fronts. One, the human being has evolved to give way to his/her urges (online or offline) induced by the secretion of hormones in different emotional states like anger, fear, disgust, surprise, etc. Two, social media tools have been designed to auger these emotional traits and harness the resulting mental state of the user to further their very goals by offering to users the means to vent their emotions. It can safely be argued that viral outrage is a well-thought-out (not accidental) feature of social media platforms. It is obviously the core feature of their product line, like the telescreen of 1984, that keeps pushing in front of you content that is so potent, inciting and emotionally charged that makes it “impossible to avoid joining in,” to quote Orwell. And as you keep scrolling, finding new topics for rage is easy: What is more is that the algorithms of YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter make users’ social media sessions so much seamless and engaging that they keep surfing these services’ content for hours without a break. Social media companies are concerned with the issues of users’ fury as little, or even lesser, as the Party of 1984 is concerned with the issues enraging the Outer Party members parting in the Two Minutes Hate.

Social media and newspeak

Language is an evolving communication tool. It affects the means, tools and devices of communication and in turn, gets affected by the artefacts of language as well. As a classical example comes 1984’s Newspeak (he refers to standard English as Oldspeak). Orwell has used words like ungood, ungood, plusgood, and doubleplusgood to mean hot, bad, very good, and superlatively good. He has also coined concepts like using gooder and goodest instead of using better and best of Oldspeak. Newspeak’s plural for man is mans and the second form of the run is runned. Some words of Oldspeak that have been rendered new meaning in 1984 include free, good, and rectify.

The dynamics of the language of social media have an eerily resemblance to Newspeak of 1984 which replaces Oldspeak. According to the principles of Newspeak antonym of “good” would be “ungood” and “plusgood” or “doubleplusgood” would be used for “better” and “best”. Similarly, the language of social media strips off all nuances from the words when Twitterati use a ‘u’ for ‘you’. Akin to the language of social media, Newspeak’s primary aim is to capture essential meanings only (Aldridge, 2014)^[6].

Newspeak apart, 1984 has left its footprint on standard English vocabulary. Big brother, Orwellian state, doublespeak, doublethink, thoughtcrime, facecrime, unperson, telescreen, sexcrime, goodsex, goodthink are a few words that have been used by Orwell with meaning defined in Newspeak. Out of Newspeak and 1984, almost half a dozen words have become a part of standard English.

Given the dynamics, scale, variety and versatility of social media, it is bound to have an effect on the way we use English in day-to-day life (read informal settings). And these informal effects get reflected in the formal language also with the passage of time. Social media have transformed the way we communicate. It is an enabler in terms of the numerical and geographical scale of relationships. Using social media platforms we can communicate with more people dispersed globally. Compelled by platform-specific limits or propelled by real-time chatting, the use of acronyms like OMG (Oh! my God) and LOL (laugh out loud) and other nonstandard abbreviations like r (are) and u (you) has become very common in social media communications.

Apart from acronyms, a host of words originated from the Internet and its manifestations like social media platforms have become a part of formal language. Such words include a blog (blogger, blogging), vlog, buzzword, google (as a verb), and tweet. It can easily be concluded that social media communities are actively re-appropriating existing words and also creating new words.

Social media communications don’t stop at creating abbreviations, acronyms and new words. In more than a dozen years of social media existence, the user community has appropriated several words such as viral, virus, worm, troll (trolling), friend (verb), unfriend (verb), and like. Here, the words have been given a new meaning in a new context. The impact of social media newspeak is undeniable in new age society. Just consider, at the turn of the millennium, if someone had asked you to “write a blog on the dynamics of a Tweet becoming viral” or to WhatsApp your bio details to him, you’d have wondered if the man was in his right state of mind.

What big techs can do?

1984 being a masterpiece of the dystopian genre closes with Winston, the main character of the plot, becoming totally compliant with the Party’s rule; believing that *two plus two equals five* and participating in the Two Minute Hate ritual literally fully. We don’t have to be Winston, but more importantly, social media companies don’t have to behave like the Party.

Gavet (2020)^[2] has proposed measures that may be taken up by social media platforms to put in their share of efforts not to let cyberspace become the Oceania of 1984. The present approach of social media companies is to balance their content by allowing unbridled freedom of speech subject to the law of land. Social media platforms can analyse the content before hosting it on their platform and when a user tries to post some inflammatory content, a pop-up message asking “Are you sure?” may be offered. Though not a preventive approach, it may help the user pause and rethink. Though very unlikely, Big Techs may consider changing their algorithms to stop showing suggested posts as a feature to keep the users engaged even after they have completed viewing the posts of the people they follow. Further, Big Techs, instead of merely providing an inert platform for hosting content without any discrimination, may dispute the ‘contradictions’ as defined in propositional logic. Such media may not be taken down but a warning of false information may be attached to it. Similarly tags like “potentially harmful for humanity!”, “misleading information!”, “disputable information!”, etc. may be associated with media elements after a semi-automated

content analysis process. Similar pop-ups warning the users (in advance) regarding a potential infringement of ethical guidelines, rules and laws may be flashed.

Technological solutions proposed in the foregoing paragraphs go beyond the concept of corporate social responsibility. A business approach that wants to improve humanity has been proposed for Big Techs. Such a business paradigm is supposed to support its partners' and customers' strengths, rather than exploit their weaknesses. Though the universe of social media may have a striking resemblance to 1984's Ingsoc, everything is not lost to write a different ending.

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