

UPDATING ORWELL'S '1984'

Skills and strategies under development

Language Arts

1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process
5. Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process
6. Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies for reading a variety of literary texts
7. Uses general skills and strategies to understand a variety of informational texts
8. Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes

Arts and Communication

1. Understands the principles, processes and products associated with arts and communication media
2. Knows and applies appropriate criteria to arts and communication products
3. Uses critical and creative thinking in various arts and communication settings
4. Understands ways in which the human experience is transmitted and reflected in the arts and communication

Life Skills: Working With Others

1. Contributes to the overall effort of a group
2. Displays effective interpersonal communication skills

Technology

1. Understands the relationships among science, technology, society and the individual
2. Understands the nature and uses of different forms of technology

Civics

1. Understands ideas about civic life, politics and government
2. Understands the essential characteristics of limited and unlimited governments
3. Understands issues concerning the disparities between ideals and reality in American political and social life
4. Understands issues regarding personal, political and economic rights

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5. Understands issues regarding the proper scope and limits of rights and the relationships among personal, political and economic rights

Theater

1. Understands how informal and formal theater, film, television and electronic media productions create and communicate meaning

Overview

How does George Orwell's vision of technology and its uses in «1984» compare with today's reality? How have concerns about privacy and freedom expressed in the novel been manifested in the contemporary world? In this lesson, students compare and contrast the world, people and technologies of «1984» with those of today and create a treatment for a modern film, print or stage adaptation that revolves around current technologies.

Materials

Full text of «1984» (<http://www.george-orwell.org/1984/0.html>), computers with Internet access, software for podcasting and projection equipment, copies of the handout «1984» vs. Today», video cameras and film-editing software (optional)

Section 1: Introductory materials for home-reading and discussion

1. Ask students to explore Orwell's language with the help of a following article from *New York Times*.

Simpler Terms; If It's 'Orwellian,' It's Probably Not

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/22/weekinreview/simpler-terms-if-it-s-orwellian-it-s-probably-not.html?pagewanted=all>

By GEOFFREY NUNBERG

Published: June 22, 2003

ON George Orwell's centenary – he was born on June 25, 1903 – the most telling sign of his influence is the words he left us with: not just «thought police», «doublethink» and «unperson», but also «Orwellian» itself, the most widely used adjective derived from the name of a modern writer.

In the press and on the Internet, it's more common than «Kafkaesque», «Hemingwayesque» and «Dickensian» put together. It even noses out the rival political reproach «Machiavellian», which had a 500-year head start.

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Eponyms are always the narrowest sort of tribute, though. «Orwellian» doesn't have anything to do with Orwell as a socialist thinker, or for that matter, as a human being. People are always talking about Orwell's decency, but «Orwellian decency» would be an odd phrase indeed. And the adjective commemorates Orwell the writer only for three of his best known works: the novels «Animal Farm» and «1984» and the essay «Politics and the English Language».

«Orwellian» reduces Orwell's palette to a single shade of noir. It brings to mind only sordid regimes of surveillance and thought control and the distortions of language that make them possible.

Orwell's views on language may outlive his political ideas. At least they seem to require no updating or apology, whereas his partisans feel the need to justify the continuing relevance of his politics. He wasn't the first writer to condemn political euphemisms. Edmund Burke was making the same points 150 years earlier about the language used by apologists for the French Revolution: «Things are never called by their common names. Massacre is sometimes agitation, sometimes effervescence, sometimes excess».

But Orwell is the writer most responsible for diffusing the modern view of political language as an active accomplice of tyranny. As he wrote in «Politics and the English Language», «Political language ... is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind».

That was an appealing notion to an age that had learned to be suspicious of ideologies, and critics on all sides have found it useful to cite «Politics and the English Language» in condemning the equivocations of their opponents.

Critics on the left hear Orwellian resonances in phrase like «weapons of mass protection», for nonlethal arms, or in names like the Patriot Act or the Homeland Security Department's Operation Liberty Shield, which authorizes indefinite detention of asylum-seekers from certain nations. Critics on the right hear them in phrases like «reproductive health services», «Office of Equality Assurance» and «English Plus», for bilingual education.

And just about everyone discerned an Orwellian note in the name of the Pentagon's Total Information Awareness project, which was aimed at mining a vast centralized database of personal information for patterns that might reveal terrorist activities. (The name was changed last month to the Terrorist Information Awareness program, in an effort to reassure Americans who have nothing to hide.)

Which of those terms are deceptive packaging and which are merely effective branding is a matter of debate. But there's something troubling in

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the easy use of the label «Orwellian», as if these phrases committed the same sorts of linguistic abuses that led to the gulags and the death camps.

The specters that «Orwellian» conjures aren't really the ones we have to worry about. Newspeak may have been a plausible invention in 1948, when totalitarian thought control still seemed an imminent possibility. But the collapse of Communism revealed the bankruptcy not just of the Stalinist social experiment, but of its linguistic experiments as well. After 75 years of incessant propaganda, «socialist man» turned out to be a cynic who didn't even believe the train schedules.

Political language is still something to be wary of, but it doesn't work as Orwell feared. In fact the modern language of control is more effective than Soviet Newspeak precisely because it's less bleak and intimidating.

Think of the way business has been re-engineering the language of ordinary interaction in the interest of creating «high-performance corporate cultures». To a reanimated Winston Smith, there would be something wholly familiar in being told that he had to file an annual vision statement or that he should henceforth eliminate «problems» from his vocabulary in favor of «issues».

But the hero of «1984» would find the whole exercise much more convivial than the Two Minute Hate at the Ministry of Truth. And he'd be astonished that management allowed employees to post «Dilbert» strips on the walls of their cubicles.

For Orwell, the success of political jargon and euphemism required an uncritical or even unthinking audience: a «reduced state of consciousness», as he put it, was «favorable to political conformity». As things turned out, though, the political manipulation of language seems to thrive on the critical skepticism that Orwell encouraged.

In fact, there has never been an age that was so well-schooled in the perils of deceptive language or in decoding political and commercial messages, as seen in the official canonization of Orwell himself. Thanks to the schools, «1984» is probably the best-selling political novel of modern times (current Amazon sales rank: No. 93), and «Politics and the English Language» is the most widely read essay about the English language and very likely in it as well.

But as advertisers have known for a long time, no audience is easier to beguile than one that is smugly confident of its own sophistication. The word «Orwellian» contributes to that impression. Like «propaganda», it implies an aesthetic judgment more than a moral one. Calling an expression Orwellian means not that it's deceptive but that it's crudely deceptive.

Today, the real damage isn't done by the euphemisms and circumlocutions that we're likely to describe as Orwellian. «Ethnic

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cleansing», «revenue enhancement», «voluntary regulation», «tree-density reduction», «faith-based initiatives», «extra affirmative action», «single-payer plans» – these terms may be oblique, but at least they wear their obliquity on their sleeves.

Rather, the words that do the most political work are simple ones – «jobs and growth», «family values» and «color-blind» not to mention «life» and «choice». But concrete words like these are the hardest ones to see through. They're opaque when you hold them up to the light.

Orwell knew that, of course. «To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle» – not what you'd call an Orwellian sentiment, but very like the man.

2. Make comments on the following quotes from Orwell's works:

Every war when it comes, or before it comes, is represented not as a war but as an act of self-defense against a homicidal maniac.

Doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them.

Each generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it, and wiser than the one that comes after it.

All political thinking for years past has been vitiated in the same way. People can foresee the future only when it coincides with their own wishes, and the most grossly obvious facts can be ignored when they are unwelcome.

If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.

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

Section 2: In-class Activities

1. Warm-Up

Give students the following list of words from «1984»:

*Big Brother
doublethink
thoughtcrime
Newspeak
memory hole
Orwellian*

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Students who have read the novel will recognize their provenance and should define them, as well as give a contemporary example of something that could be described similarly. Engage students who have not read the novel in a game in which they look at each word and suggest a definition based on what they know from the word alone and any connotations they bring to the parts of each word.

After students have shared their definitions, discuss the following questions, talk about whether students have heard any of these terms used in school, at home, among friends or in the media, and in what contexts.

Lead them to contrast utopian fiction, which imagines an ideal world, with dystopian fiction, which imagines a nightmare world.

Then explore these questions:

- Why are these terms and the concepts they name still part of our vocabulary?
- What does it say about contemporary society that we use terms from a dystopian novel to describe aspects of it?
- In what way have these words taken on new meanings over time with the advent of new technologies?
- What do these words suggest about us and about our uses of technology?
- How are they used as references to concerns over freedom and privacy?

Ask:

- How have communication technologies – including Facebook, Twitter, cellphones, smartphones and Web cams – changed our culture?
- Is there such a thing as privacy in a world where such technologies are ubiquitous?
- Finally, ask:
 - How does technology enable people to violate others' privacy and freedoms?
 - How can people use technology to protect their own privacy and freedoms?

List ideas on the board, and tell students that they will now read an article that delves into these issues further.

2. Reading and discussion

Little Brother Is Watching

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/17/magazine/17FOB-WWLN-t.html>

By WALTER KIRN

Published: October 15, 2010

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In George Orwell's «1984», that novel of totalitarian politics whose great mistake was to emphasize the villainy of society's masters while playing down the mischief of the masses, the goal of communications technology was brutal and direct: to ensure the dominance of the state. The sinister «telescreens» placed in people's homes spewed propaganda and conducted surveillance, keeping the population passive and the leadership firmly in control. In the face of constant monitoring, all people could do was sterilize their behavior, conceal their thoughts and carry on like model citizens.

This was, it turns out, a quaint scenario, grossly simplistic and deeply melodramatic. As the Internet proves every day, it isn't some stern and monolithic Big Brother that we have to reckon with as we go about our daily lives, it's a vast cohort of prankish Little Brothers equipped with devices that Orwell, writing 60 years ago, never dreamed of and who are loyal to no organized authority. The invasion of privacy – of others' privacy but also our own, as we turn our lenses on ourselves in the quest for attention by any means – has been democratized.

For Tyler Clementi, the Rutgers University student who recently committed suicide after a live-stream video of an intimate encounter of his was played on the Web, Little Brother took the form of a prying roommate with a webcam. The snoop had no discernible agenda other than silly, juvenile troublemaking, which made his actions more disturbing in certain ways than the oppressive prying of a dictatorship. The roommate, it seems, was acting on impulse, at least initially, and his transgression couldn't be anticipated, let alone defended against. Clementi, unlike Orwell's Winston Smith, who hid from the telescreens whenever possible and understood that the price of personhood was ceaseless self-censorship and vigilance, had no way of knowing that the walls had eyes. Nor did his unseen observer anticipate the ultimate consequences of his intrusion.

In «1984», the abolition of personal space was part of an overarching government policy, but nowadays it's often nothing more than a side effect of wired high spirits. The era of the «viral video», when footage of some absorbing slice of life can spread overnight around the globe, is bringing out the anarchist in all of us. Sometimes the results are welcome, benign, and the intruder does his subject a favor. Take the young man who taped his girlfriend shimmying in front of a TV attached to a Wii Fit video game. He shot the clip without her knowledge, apparently, and in no time Google and YouTube made her famous. She capitalized on her high profile by appearing on «The Tyra Banks Show».

There are also times, of course, when Little Brother does a positive service to society by turning the tables on the state and watching the

watchers. The other day a video emerged that seemed to show an Israeli soldier dancing in a mocking manner around a cowering Palestinian woman whom he appeared to have under his control. The viewer couldn't help but be reminded of more shocking pictures from Abu Ghraib – scenes of torture that might never have come to light if Little Brother hadn't been standing nearby. The irony is that these images, which caused a convulsion of national moral conscience, were taken – in some cases, at least – as photographic boasts or trophies. So giddy with power and numb to its abuses were the camera-wielding prison guards that they indicted themselves with their own antics.

In the postideological YouTube-topia that Orwell couldn't have foreseen, information flows in all directions and does as it pleases, for better or for worse, serving no masters and obeying no party line. The telescreens, tiny, mobile and ubiquitous, at times seem to be working independently, for some mysterious purpose all their own. This morning, when I sat down to write, I was distracted by a story on my computer about a Google Street View camera that snapped pictures of a corpse lying on a bloody street in urban Brazil. I clicked on the link, unable to do otherwise, and up came the awful, disconcerting image. For a moment, I felt like a voyeur, spiritually dirtied by what I saw. A moment later I was checking the weather report and the status of my I.R.A.

Even Big Brother himself was not so cold. He, at least, had a motive for his peeping – to maintain order, to shore up his position and to put down possible rebellions – but I and the countless Little Brothers like me lack any clear notion of what we're after. A fleeting sensation of omnipotence? The gratification of idle curiosity? Our nonstop trafficking in stolen images, sometimes as consumers and sometimes as producers (is there any meaningful difference anymore?), adds up to a story without a plot. Is it a tragic story? On occasion. It was tragic for Tyler Clementi and for his roommate, who ruined his own life by spying on another's, but for those who are suddenly lofted to fame and riches by achieving viral visibility, it's closer to a feel-good comedy.

Ours is a fragmentarian society, infinitely divided against itself and endlessly disrupted from within by much the same technologies that, in Orwell's somber novel, assured a dull and deadening stability. In some ways, his nightmare vision of state control is cozy and reassuring by comparison. Big Brother may have stifled dissent by forcing conformity on his frightened subjects, but his trespasses were predictable and manageable. What's more, his assaults on citizens' privacy left the concept of privacy intact, allowing the possibility that with his overthrow people might live again as they once had.

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Little Brother affords us no such luck, in part because he dwells inside us rather than in some remote and walled-off headquarters. In the new, chaotic regime of networked lenses and microphones that point every which way and rest in every hand, permitting us to train them on ourselves as easily as we aim them at one another, the private and public realms are so confused that it's best to treat them as identical. With nowhere to hide, you might as well perform, dispensing with old-fashioned notions of discretion and personal dignity. If Tyler Clementi had remembered to do this – to yield his personal life to the machine and acknowledge, with Shakespeare, that the world's a soundstage – he might have shrugged off the embarrassment he suffered and made a reality show of his existence. He might have asked Little Brother into his room instead of choosing, fatally, to keep him out in the only manner he must have thought possible.

Questions for discussion and reading comprehension:

- What does Mr. Kirn mean when he says that the invasion of privacy has been «democratized»?
- How are today's communication technologies and communicators different from those Orwell imagined in «1984»?
- Do you agree or disagree with Mr. Kirn that the actions of Tyler Clementi's roommate are «more disturbing» than those of Orwell's Big Brother?
- In what way, according to Mr. Kirn, can the actions of «Little Brother» benefit society?
- How has today's technology blurred the lines between what's public and what's private?
- What does Mr. Kirn mean when he says modern technology contributes to the fragmentation of society?

Section 3: Activities

Activity 1. Comparing

Tell students they will build on the work Mr. Kirn begins in this piece by comparing Orwell's vision in «1984» with contemporary life.

Explain that they will do this by drawing comparisons and contrasts on a number of fronts – character, setting, theme, jargon, technology – calling upon their own lived experience and current events as they do so. Ask them to be as specific as possible in the parallels they draw. Offer them this model to help them get started.

«1984» vs. Today

(http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/blogs/learning/pdf/2010/20101021_1984.pdf).

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Directions: Match these quotes, characters and other elements from George Orwell's «1984» to contemporary equivalents.

Continue the chart on your own, adding other themes, settings, plot points and so on.

| «1984» | Today |
|--|-------|
| <p>«Never again will you be capable of ordinary human feeling. Everything will be dead inside you. Never again will you be capable of love, or friendship, or joy of living, or laughter, or curiosity, or courage, or integrity. You will be hollow. We shall squeeze you empty and then we shall fill you with ourselves». – Book 3, Chapter 2</p> | |
| <p>«Do you begin to see, then, what kind of world we are creating? It is the exact opposite of the stupid hedonistic Utopias that the old reformers imagined. A world of fear and treachery and torment, a world of trampling and being trampled upon, a world which will grow not less but more merciless as it refines itself. Progress in our world will be progress toward more pain». – Book 3, Chapter 3</p> | |
| <p>«There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time. But at any rate they could plug in your wire whenever they wanted to. You had to live—did live, from habit that became instinct—in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized». – Book 1, Chapter 1</p> | |

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| | |
|--|--|
| <p>«Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought?... Has it ever occurred to you, Winston, that by the year 2050, at the very latest, not a single human being will be alive who could understand such a conversation as we are having now?... The whole climate of thought will be different. In fact, there will be no thought, as we understand it now. Orthodoxy means not thinking—not needing to think. Orthodoxy is unconsciousness». – Book 1, Chapter 5</p> | |
| Big Brother | |
| Winston | |
| Julia | |
| Ministry of Truth | |
| Telescreen | |

When they are finished, invite students to share and discuss their ideas as a class. Discuss how the novel and the real world are different, in terms of how technology is used, by whom (government vs. ordinary citizens) and in what contexts.

Activity 2. Discussion of reimagining

For students' inspiration, show and discuss these reimaginings of «1984» – one a short film (<http://digitalbooktalk.com/?p=25>), the other a television commercial ('1984' Apple Macintosh Commercial// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhsWzJo2sN4>) – as models.

Activity 3. Modern Adaptation

Next, tell pairs that they will collaborate on a treatment for a modern adaptation of «1984» (for print, film or stage), including contemporary technology, drawing on the comparisons they drew between the novel and contemporary life. (Alternatively, have students write their treatments independently.) Note that, guided by their own interpretations, they can hew closely to the original with minor updates or diverge in ways that point up how the novel contrasts with the real world today.

As they work, ask them to consider how to update the setting, characters, themes and technologies to reflect, and comment on, contemporary society. To brainstorm in preparation for writing, students might add a third column to their T-charts to developing ideas for how to represent in fiction the ways «1984» and the modern world compare and contrast.

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Treatments should include characters, setting, themes and plot summaries and should offer a clear rationale for updating the novel in whichever way they choose. When their ideas are generated, students then write and pitch their treatments to their classmates.

Section 4. Going Further

1). Students write a chapter, or act out or film a scene, from their proposed adaptation and share it with the class.

Following the performances, discuss the following:

- What is the effect of artists' creations of fictional contexts to critique events or individuals in contemporary culture?
- What other books, plays, movies and other art forms can you think of that comment on society?
- What critiques of contemporary culture have your fellow students offered up in their adaptations of «1984»?
- What issues have they illuminated?

2). Alternatively, consider one of the following options:

Students create one-pagers based on a quotation from the novel «1984» that still has resonance today in some way. They should find or draw at least one image illustrating a contemporary parallel; find one quote that is also a contemporary parallel, echo or extension; and write a question they would like to ask Orwell. (Alternatively, they might base their one-pagers on a quote from Mr. Kirn's essay.) Display final products and return to the essential questions that frame this lesson through the lenses offered by student one-pagers.

3). Students pair up to write and record podcasts in which one plays an interviewer and the other George Orwell, in which he answers questions about the novel and reacts to the modern world.

4). Students who have not read the novel maintain a log for a week in which they record their technological activities and whereabouts. When they bring the log into class, encourage them to analyze their behavior. Were there times they acted like «Little Brother», times they believed that they were being watched or had sacrificed privacy? Did they believe that over all, technology made their life better over the course of this week? Or did they believe that they were being controlled by it?

5). A recent study (*The empathy deficit. By Keith O'Brien*// http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/10/17/the_empathy_deficit/) showed that young adults are less empathetic, perhaps in part due to «a millennial mixture of video games, social media, reality TV and hypercompetition». Students read and respond to this article.

(By Amanda Christy Brown and Holly Epstein Ojalvo,

From *The New York Times Learning Network*, October 21, 2010)