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Tech of *1984* and Modern Reality

The world of George Orwell's *1984* is under constant surveillance by the governmental entity known as Big Brother, and they use any means necessary to watch and control their population. This includes the use of a wide range of surveillance technologies which include: telescreens, surveillance helicopters small, and microphones. However, despite *1984* being a fictional world within a book the technologies depicted in it are eerily similar to real world cameras, patrol helicopters/drones, and bugs. This means that with the use of this technology a dystopian society that controls thoughts and actions may not be entirely fiction.

The first piece of technology *1984* introduced that is used on a large scale to monitor and manipulate the populations is the telescreen. Within *1984* the telescreen was a large TV-like screen with built in cameras and microphones. Our main character, Winston, is subjected to constant surveillance from these devices along with every other person within Big Brother's influence. The novel states, "Any sound Winston made, above the level of a low whisper, would be picked up...so long as he remained within the field of vision which the metal plaque commanded, he could be seen as well as heard" (Orwell pg. 90). Additionally, the telescreens could be "dimmed, but there was no way of shutting it off completely" (Orwell pg. 90). Despite these facts however, telescreens only have a limited range and it is impossible to monitor every citizen at once.

Meanwhile, in real life we have modern surveillance cameras which one may see in a commercial setting or around a well guarded building such as the White House. While these cameras don't all have the ability to stay on all day or depict information through a screen like a TV can, they are still comparable to the telescreens in *1984*. For example, the more modern models have, "HD video capture, two-way audio, night-vision and low-light recording" (CornerStone Protection). These features make a surveillance camera unfortunately close to the dystopian telescreens. This may raise some concerns towards the use of surveillance cameras in certain settings, but it is important to note that most of these cameras are not always being monitored and due to limited storage many security cameras don't remain active all day, as mentioned before. Overall, while security cameras do share some features of the Orwellian telescreens they are not a complete copy and are lacking in most of the telescreen's dystopian features.

Next, Orwell introduces the surveillance helicopter. While these helicopters are only introduced briefly, they play a significant role in shaping the idea that everyone is watched in *1984*. These helicopters serve to watch and, more importantly, intimidate the population to prevent any one from committing acts of "treason" against Big Brother. The novel states, "In the far distance a helicopter skimmed down between roofs, hovered for an instant, like a bluebottle, and darted away" (Orwell pg. 90). The helicopters patrol as shown constantly throughout the world of *1984* which serves as one of the many factors that control the population. The use of intimidation combined with surveillance works as the perfect way to keep Big Brother's population in check to prevent anyone from trying to go against the dystopia.

In comparison to these helicopters today there actually exist helicopters and drones that do practically the same exact thing as the helicopters in *1984* do. For example, as of October of

2024 “more than 2,400 [in Fresno, CA]” helicopters with a response time of “61 seconds” (Sheehan). This shows that the use of helicopters is becoming commonplace with worryingly short response times. What’s more worrisome is that this is just the stats for one city in a major country, in a larger or capital city these numbers could be twice as bad which would only increase the possibility of a dystopian future. Additionally, some regions have made use of unmanned drones and because of this many feel like “there’s no such thing as privacy out here” (Mehrota). It is also important to note the versatility of drones that have come with increasingly technologically modern times. The smallest drone that is used for the purpose of spying is 6 inches by 1 inch with a flight time of 20 minutes and a viable range of 1 mile. This is the Black Hornet Nano by Proxy Dynamics AS. This drone was developed in 2013 and given night-vision capabilities in 2014. While the limitations of this drone are clear, it is also important to consider the fact that it was developed over 10 years ago. These drones combined with the increased use of highly responsive police patrol helicopters should be evidence that it is entirely possible that, in the right hands, an Orwellian dystopian society that controls thoughts and actions is an impossibility.

Thirdly, the reader is introduced to *1984*’s small microphones. Within *1984* these small microphones worked in the exact same way as the modern day bugs that are often depicted in movies or used for military purposes. Oftentimes these microphones were used in areas where telescreens couldn’t be put without standing out. “There were no telescreens [in the country], of course, but there was always the danger of concealed microphones by which your voice might be picked up and recognized” (Orwell, 198). As stated in the quote, the danger of these microphones is their ability to be hidden in places that would normally be safe from telescreens and helicopters. This allows Big Brother to extend their reach beyond just cities and towns, it

allows for them to envelop entire countries and reach most parts of continents. Within *1984* these microphones exponentially increased Big Brother's ability to control the population, and it may not stop just within the fictional world of *1984*.

These small microphones are directly comparable to bugs, which accomplish the exact same feats as *1984*'s microphones. In real life, bugs are also small recording devices that are typically used to record conversations that are otherwise kept secret. These devices are used in a military setting in most countries, but they have been used before in building to listen in on everyday conversations of ordinary people. The most famous example of bugs being used this way is after World War 2 in the Soviet controlled East Germany and East Berlin. "The state security service, known as the Stasi, monitored citizens, used wire taps, bugged homes, and interviewed friends and family members to terminate movements of rebellion" (Wagner). This level of control and monitoring was accomplished over 60 years ago and would last up until East Berlin and Germany were freed in 1989. Due to this evidence it is known that bugs can be used to monitor, limit, control, and threaten a population. This reinforces the idea that, like in *1984*, it would be possible for a dystopian society that can control a demographic to possibly exist in the current times.

In conclusion, there are many technologies in the real world that compare to those within George Orwell's *1984*. There exists surveillance cameras, patrol helicopters/drones and bugs which are seen and heard about daily in modern life. Unfortunately, these technologies have nearly identical functions to *1984*'s telescreens, surveillance helicopters and small microphones. While the real life tech may not be used for the same purposes as their *1984* counterparts are, this all still goes to show that it is indeed possible for a dystopian government to come into power and control a population's thoughts and actions.

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