



The Orwellian Vision of Utopia

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Abstract

This article comes from the adaptation and updating of a chapter of my doctoral thesis, where I questioned the roles of journalists and artists in the so-called digital societies of the twenty-first century. This research is based on a premise exposed by communications' theorist Marshall McLuhan (1962, 1964), where he defined artists as the "antennae of the race" and as the "early warning systems" of the societies they inhabit (Wolfe, 1968). For this reason, I choose the journalistic and literary work of George Orwell as an example of an artist whose critical mind and sensibility allowed him to see beyond all the dogma and all the propaganda that clouded the reasoning of most of his contemporaries.

Keywords: Utopia, Dystopia, Orwell, Orwellian, Modernism

1. Introduction

Within the broad structure of my thesis, the analysis I present in the following pages allowed me to introduce what I believe is the perfect example of an artist who acted as an early warning system, coming from a period that may be seen as the ultimate crisis of the modern age: an era that some communication theorists from the twentieth century, like McLuhan and his predecessor Harold Innis (1950), believed came as a consequence of the printing press and the effects it had on western societies after its introduction from China in the mid fifteenth century. Following this line, in the succeeding chapters of my thesis I referred back to Orwell's work (as well as the other utopian and dystopian writers I study in this article) to draw a comparison between the role (and legacy) of artists in a world where print was the prevailing media, with that of artists that live (or have lived) in a world where electromagnetic and digital media are the most influential.

It seems like a futile exercise to write about the influence of digital media on twenty-first century societies. History-changing events happening on a daily basis; news coming at us from everywhere, *tweeting* in the air amongst endless bytes of banality, sensationalism, pornography, art and all other categories included in the word *information*.

Many years must pass before someone can properly judge the effects of the present (i.e., the present of 2015) over the generation born in the early twenty-first century. But this feeling of uncertainty and expectation is hardly unique. At the turn of the last two centuries, humanity was also facing unprecedented technological, social and political conditions. Conditions that, like the ones happening today, augured a new world order (to use a common aphorism from the late twentieth century).

As Orwell's review (1948) of Oscar Wilde's *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (1891) shows, by the mid-twentieth century, the nineteenth century ideals of individualism and technological progress had degraded, leading societies into that stage of totalitarian collectivism that inspired the plot of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)

In his *As I Please* column of 4 February 1944, Orwell wrote: "The really frightening thing about totalitarianism is not that it commits 'atrocities' but that it attacks the concept of objective truth." (Orwell, 1968, vol 3, p 88).

Later on, this fear would be reflected as one of the driving arguments of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "Who controls the past, controls the future, who controls the present, controls the past." (p 37).

This shows how Orwell's journalistic work continuously shaped his literary one, to a point where it is impossible to understand one without the other. Just as such, as exposed by Babae, Singh, Zhicheng & Haiqing (2015), it is impossible to understand the notion of *dystopia* without understanding that of *utopia*: a term coined by Sir Thomas More in the 1500s, which origins date (at least) as far back as Ancient Greece, with Plato's conception of the ideal form of social organisation (which he imagined as the lost civilisation of Atlantis). Therefore, dystopia can be understood as the degeneration of utopia, which in the mind of the authors studied in this article (and of many others that I have not the time or the space to study in this work) was provoked by the development of modern technologies and its effect on the human species.

In the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, history was "a palimpsest, scrapped clean and re-inscribed exactly as often as necessary" (p. 35). There is another metaphor in English literature that involves the figure of the palimpsest. It is found in Thomas de Quincey's *Suspira de Profundis* (1845). Unlike Orwell's, de Quincey's metaphor does not relate to history and how it can be altered by those in power but to memory and how it endures and is preserved through some sort of artistic legacy:

In the illustration imagined by myself, from the case of some individual palimpsest, the Grecian tragedy had seemed to be displaced, but was *not* displaced by the monkish legend; and the monkish legend had seemed to be displaced, but was *not* displaced, by the knightly romance (...) Alchemy there is none of passion or disease that can scorch away these immortal impresses. (p 152)

Based on de Quincey's (and not his own) metaphor, I compare Orwell's prophecies with those of his most influential predecessors, including: Oscar Wilde, H.G. Wells, Jack London, Evgeny Zamyatin and Aldous Huxley.

2. Orwell on Wilde's Socialist Utopia

As mentioned earlier, in 1948 Orwell published a review of Oscar Wilde's *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*. The gap between Wilde's socialist dream and Orwell's totalitarian nightmare portrays what came to be known as *the crisis of modernism*. In *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, Wilde presents an answer to a question authors such as Orwell and Huxley would ask a few decades later: *What is progress?* To Wilde, progress meant "the realisation of Utopias". But what were these Utopias Wilde dreamed about? And why had they turned into nightmares by the time of Orwell's adulthood?

The three main arguments running across *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* are: (a) Socialism leads to Individualism and through Individualism the human being evolves (b) Socialism is achieved by the abolition of private property, as the abolition of private property will end social inequality and (c) in the future all unpleasant work is to be done by machines.

Despite recognising the second and third arguments as the main fallacies in Wilde's Utopia, when Orwell sums up Wilde's optimistic forecast by stating that the world will be inhabited by artist that will individually strive for perfection, there is no irony or resentment in his words: only the nostalgia of a dying man watching the dreams of his younger years from a world of atomic bombs and concentration camps.

Orwell also acknowledged how Wilde had recognised authoritarian tendencies within the socialist movement. Thus, Wilde's praise of the individual over the State – and his view of individualism as the path to human evolution – can be seen as the beginning of a train of thought that, by the mid-twentieth century, had evolved (or devolved) into Orwell's fear of a big, omnipresent state, which held control over its citizens' individuality.

Despite the naivety of Wilde's utopian arguments, Orwell ends up praising *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* as an opportune reminder of that "original, half-forgotten objective of human brotherhood". Thus, looking at Orwell and Wilde as *early warning systems*, then the first question that comes to mind is: are the societies of the early twenty-first century closer to Wilde's Utopia or to Orwell's dystopia? In fact, this is the most obvious question regarding all the authors included in this analysis (and particularly relevant in the comparison between Orwell and Huxley). But in the case of *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, before asking such question, it is important to ask whether Wilde's Utopia is still a Utopia.

For those who see the world portrayed in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* as an ideal form of human evolution, it is always good to question the arguments exposed in Wilde's essay. By the end of the 1940s, Orwell had detected two main fallacies in Wilde's arguments: the abolition of private property did not necessarily lead to an egalitarian distribution of wealth, and machinery was still not able to replace human labour. Recent advances in software and robotics are turning the idea of machines replacing human labour into a not-too-distant possibility. From many perspectives – from Orwell's to the Unabomber's (1995) – this is not necessarily a positive thing.

Partington (2004) points out one fundamental difference in the way an Edwardian like H.G. Wells (which argument can be extended to a Victorian like Wilde) and a Georgian like Orwell perceived technology. The latter conceived the possibility that, as Orwell would express it in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), "the machine itself may be the enemy".

Who was right? Do humans shape technology or does technology shape humanity? Or both? And to what extent does the former supersede the latter? Or vice versa? These are questions that, like in the times of Wilde, Wells and Orwell are still impossible to answer (and might remain like this for as long as humans continue developing new technologies). However, I believe it is important to continue asking them.

In the matter of private property and the distribution of the planet's wealth, things are even more complex. Not only poverty and inequality remain as current problems. Issues like climate change, an ever-growing human population and an increasing rate of consumption of natural resources are also continuously altering the equation.

The news of governments, such as China, as well as investment funds and multinational companies from the first world, buying farmlands in the third world (Barrionuevo, 2011; Vidal, 2011), augur that in the future, the rural areas of the planet will be operated under a new style of feudalism. On the other hand, most of the population will be living in cities (UNFPA, 2007). What will happen to those who remain in rural areas? Will they stay as serfs of an ethereal feudal lord? Can Oscar Wilde's ideal of individualism flourish in overcrowded cities?

Orwell's major criticism of both Wilde and Wells' views was that they were too civilised. They could not grasp the reality of the third world. As mentioned in his review of *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, "socialists thought always of the highly developed Western countries and ignored the fearful poverty of Asia and Africa". Still, Orwell is way more critical of Wells utopianism than of Wilde's. Why is this so?

From Orwell's perspective, Wilde's Utopia remained as a hazy dream from a remote ancestor. As distant as Wilde's dream may have appeared from Orwell's reality, the fact that it remained as a germ of that "half-forgotten objective of human brotherhood" was a faint, but still palpable, call for optimism. On the other hand, Orwell's final impression of Wells' was that of a disillusioned son at his father's dying bed.

Partington describes Orwell's criticism of Wells as a parricide. This term comes from Orwell himself, as in the essay *Wells, Hitler and the World State* (1941a), Orwell asked: "Is it not a sort of parricide for a person of my age to find fault with H.G. Wells?" Then he added, "The minds of all of us, and therefore the physical world, would be perceptibly different if Wells had never existed" (Orwell, 1941a, para. 7).

By acknowledging Wells as the most influential figure over his generation, Orwell is praising Wells' ability to visualise Wilde's Utopia within the technological, social and political frame of the early twentieth century. But also, finding the same fallacies in Wells' prophecies as he had found in Wilde's (i.e., a simplistic – almost absent – view of the problems of the third world and an over-optimistic perception of technology), Orwell seemed to be telling Wells: You should have known better. I am who I am because of you, I know what I know because of you, and you were wrong; and look what we have done to the world.

3. Orwell on Wells: Motives for a Parricide

Nowhere is the imprint of the first half of the twentieth century more evident than in the career of H.G. Wells. How distant is the prophetic writer of technological romances from the angry preacher who finally prophesied:

The end of everything we call life is close at hand and cannot be evaded (...) there is no way out or round or through the impasse. (...) [man] has to give place to some other animal better adapted to face the fate that closes in more and more swiftly upon mankind. (Wells, 1945, pp 1 - 4).

The atomic bomb had blown to pieces what little remained of nineteenth century utopianism. For the ultimate believer in technological progress, it meant the end.

Orwell criticised Wells for being too civilised. This explained his inability to see a civilisation capable of emerging from the crisis of modernism. In *H.G. Wells and the World State* (1961), Wagar pointed out a similar view among some of Wells' staunchest detractors: "Belloc and Chesterton never tired of censuring Wells for his sham cosmopolitanism", describing his "so-called cosmopolis" as "only a Victorian suburb magnified to planetary proportions". Wagar also mentions a German scholar, W. Halfmann, who "used Wells as a prize illustration of 'Anglo-Saxon imperialism'" and as "the culminating figure (...) in a line that reached all the way from Bentham to Carlyle and Kipling". (pp. 256-7).

Unlike Wells, Orwell had witnessed the relationship between the colonies and their European rulers first hand. Not only was he born in India, most importantly he had served as a colonial officer in Burma for 5 years. This experience explains Orwell's scepticism of Wells' idea of a *World State*.

According to Partington (2004), "Orwell's support for patriotism was antiethical to Wells' cosmopolitanism" (p. 54). Wells regarded nationalism as a symptom of ignorance. Orwell recognised it as a much more complex reality. Patriotic feelings had been latent in countless generations and were not likely to disappear for several more. As Orwell would write in *Wells, Hitler and the World State* (1941a), the main reason why Britain had stood during the war was because of "the atavistic emotion of patriotism, the ingrained feeling of the English-speaking peoples that they are superior to foreigners".

Bringing the debate between Wells and Orwell to the present, the questions should begin with the issue of nationalism in a globalised, post-colonial planet (whatever that means). The celebrations after the death of Osama Bin Laden show that nationalism is still a big issue. Yet, the estimates of our current and future population and of the consumption of natural resources are a call for global measures. How is this going to be resolved? What would Wells say about supranational institutions like the UN? Or the G8? Or the G20? Or the EU? How do they stand in regard to his *World State*?

According to Partington, next to nationalism, the other main discordance between Orwell and Wells revolved around their perception of technology. Besides Orwell's belief that "the machine itself may be the enemy," there are other, subtler disagreements regarding the incidence of technology on mid-twentieth century societies. They also happen to relate to the issue of nationalism.

In his *As I Please* column of May 12, 1944, Orwell wrote:

Reading recently a batch of rather shallowly optimistic 'progressive' books, I struck by the automatic way in which people go on repeating certain phrases which were fashionable before 1914. Two great favourites are 'the abolition of distance' and 'the disappearance of frontiers'. (Orwell, 1968, vol 3, p 145)

Then he added:

Take simply the instance of travel. In the nineteenth century some parts of the world were unexplored, but there was almost no restriction on travel. Up to 1914 you did not need a passport for any country except Russia. The European emigrant, if he could scrape together a few pounds for the passage, simply set sail for America or Australia, and when he got there no questions were asked. In the eighteenth century it had been quite normal and safe to travel in a country with which your own country was at war. (Orwell, 1968, vol 3, p 145).

Thus, what can be said about “the instance of travel” today? On the one hand, many of the “restrictions on travel” that Orwell pointed out in the 1940s are not much of an issue for the average citizen of a Western developed nation. But what about the rest? As a Colombian, I can testify to “restrictions on travel” that a citizen from the first world would not know about. Still, I first wrote these words in Melbourne, Australia.

Nationalism, as it exists today and as it did in the 1930s, divides the world between first and second (and third) class citizens. Then again, these distinctions also exist within national boundaries. In criticising Wells for being too civilised, Orwell is questioning his capacity to grasp the complex relation between these two origins of inequality.

As Partington points out, in order to “end national sovereignty in favour of popular sovereignty,” Wells “sought the cooperation of functional groups throughout the world” (p. 49). From Orwell’s perspective, these functional groups were bound to degenerate into the *Ministries of Peace, Truth, Love and Plenty*, of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

3.1 Artist as Propagandist

Partington describes Orwell’s criticism of Wells as a “journalistic parricide.” As mentioned before, the “parricide” part comes from Orwell himself and explains a generational change of mind. But the “journalistic” part is more debatable. Wasn’t Wells the artist more influential on Orwell’s career than Wells the journalist? Finding an answer to this question is something that goes beyond the scope of my essay. But the question itself is particularly relevant, as it is a clear example of what theorists like Innis and McLuhan described as the social fragmentation of industrial societies.

From the point of view of the orthodox literary critic – who in my opinion is the ultimate representative of print-based societies – it is not possible to conciliate journalism and art, without hampering one or the other (or both). Nonetheless, based on the appreciation they had of their own work, it is safe to assume that being accused of sacrificing their art was not too dramatic for either Orwell or Wells. On the other hand, the criticism that focused on their political views seemed to sting them in a particularly painful way. Amongst the anecdotes surrounding the relationship between these two authors, the one I believe most vividly portrays Wells’ reaction to Orwell’s criticism comes from an annotation in Orwell’s War-Time Diary of March 27, 1942:

Abusive letter from H.G. Wells, who addresses me as ‘you shit,’ among many other things.
(Orwell, 1968)

Although Orwell would become the most devastating of Wells’ critics, the disenchantment with Wells’ ideal of progress had become evident before Orwell’s attacks. In *The Prophecies of Fascism* (1941b), Orwell described Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) as a “post war parody” of H.G. Wells’ *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1910). This is another evidence of how, more than a personal dispute, Orwell’s disagreement with Wells’ represented the disenchantment of an entire generation with their immediate predecessors. In *Wells, Hitler and the World State* (1941a), Orwell wrote:

...the singleness of mind, the one-sided imagination that made Wells seem like an inspired prophet in the Edwardian age, make him a shallow, inadequate thinker now. (para. 8)

Wagar mentions how Wells had “no terror of the tendency in Western civilisation towards ‘bigness’ in government, business, and social organization”. Also, that for Wells, “Bigness was intrinsically good. It made for efficiency, increased productivity, an enlargement in the range and scope of the individual life” (p. 254). On the other hand, this bigness in government, business and organisation was Orwell and Huxley’s main fear. In *Brave New World Revisited* (1959), Huxley constantly refers to the threat that “Big Business” and “Big Government” represent to the “Little Man.” He also considered that, next to “overpopulation”, “over-organisation” would be amongst the main problems troubling future societies.

The fact that Orwell regarded *Brave New World* as a parody of *When the Sleeper Wakes*, not only shows the generational discordance between these two authors but also implies a continuation between the writers of the latter and the former works. Based on their age and their perceptions of machine civilisation, one could place Orwell and Huxley in one group and H.G. Wells in the opposite. In Wells’ group, he would be joined by Oscar Wilde, his Victorian predecessor, and his American contemporary, Jack London.

However, Orwell would use a different criterion to relate and differentiate the prophecies of these authors. In *The Prophecies of Fascism*, Orwell celebrated the reprint of Jack London’s *The Iron Heel* (1908). In this essay, he compared London’s authoritarian dystopia with other futuristic novels including *When the Sleeper Wakes* and *Brave New World*. According to Orwell, the reason why Wells (and by extension Huxley) had failed to predict the rise of totalitarianism was because, unlike London – who had “the advantage to be enjoyed in not being, like Wells, a fully civilised man” – they could not grasp that “hedonistic societies do not endure.”

4. Between Hedonists and Authoritarians

By 1984 (the year not the book) it was evident that the *Soviet experiment* was not going to last. Back then, Orwell’s statement that “hedonistic societies do not endure” could have been answered with a “neither do authoritarian ones”.

Within the context of the Cold War, it was the hedonistic Americans who prevailed over the authoritarian Soviets. This fact seems to question Orwell’s prophetic accuracy. This is, of course, if one is to consider the American as a hedonistic society. But that is a question I leave for the reader to answer.

In *The Prophecies of Fascism* (1941b), Orwell argued that both H.G. Wells and Aldous Huxley had failed to predict the rise of fascism because their vision was too civilised. London, on the other hand, who as Orwell pointed out, “with his love of violence and physical strength, his belief in ‘natural aristocracy,’ his animal worship and exaltation of the primitive (...) had what some might fairly call a Fascist strain”, could foresee authoritarian regimes coming into power.

As mentioned earlier, Orwell’s experience as a colonial officer in Burma gave him a wider view of the major political and social issues of his time. This explains why he opposed the views of two English writers, such as Huxley and Wells (whom it might be added he personally met), with that of an American like London and (later) a Russian like Zamyatin.

The passage in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* where O’Brien tells Winston Smith to imagine the future as “a boot stamping on a human face—forever,” appears as one of the most obvious influences of *The Iron Heel* on *Nineteen Eighty Four*. In opposition to *The Iron Heel*, Orwell describes the ruling class in *When the Sleeper Wakes*, as “completely soft, cynical and faithless”. It is in this aspect that Orwell believed London had proven to be the most insightful; as he was aware that, “a ruling class has got to have a strict morality, a quasi-religious belief in itself, a mystique” (Orwell, 1941b).

About *Brave New World*, Orwell described it as “a brilliant caricature of the present (the present of 1930)” which, because of the same reasons ascribed to *When the Sleeper Wakes*, “probably casts no light on the future”. Today, something similar could be said about *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

If one is to deal strictly with the author’s accuracy when foreseeing the future (i.e., the future of the 1940s), then one might argue Orwell’s relevance seems to be fading away. In the article *Why Orwell Still Matters* (2007)ⁱ, Christopher Hitchens questioned whether the game “WWGOD?” (*What Would George Orwell Do?*) was still relevant in the twenty-first century. His conclusion was that it is, and it is so because Orwell’s view represents “the side of elementary humanity (...) against all experiments on the human subject” (p. 205).

Within the context of this analysis, Hitchens’ use of the word “experiment” particularly evokes the name of Aldous Huxley and his *Brave New World*. As it is exposed in more detail later on, the debate: Who was right Orwell or Huxley? is still very relevant. From a Western perspective, the events of the second half of the twentieth century seem to give Huxley the upper hand. But, as Hitchens pointed out, this conclusion is not necessarily accurate in countries under authoritarian regimes, such as Zimbabwe or China.

China’s case is particularly relevant, as its development as a national power is one of the biggest question marks of the twenty-first century. Marolt (2011) refers to China’s party-state policy towards the Internet as an “Orwellian surveillance and censorship” (p. 64). However, as Marolt also points out, the development of digital media might be altering this equation, empowering civil society in relation to the state.

The other major question mark – in terms of nationalism – involves the United States of America and what, at first sight, appears like its decline as the world’s only national superpower, which brings me back to Jack London and *The Iron Heel*.

In the passage quoted below, it is evident how, as early as the turn of the twentieth century, London was already denouncing the servility of the media – and the arts – to large economic and political powers:

I spoke of the professional men and the artists as villeins. What else are they? One and all, the professors, the preachers and the editors, hold their jobs by serving the Plutocracy, and their service consists of propagating only such ideas as are either harmless to or commendatory of the Plutocracy. (p. 115)

Although it is a process that has been happening since, at least, the late eighteenth century, the establishment of the media as the fourth state became evident at the turn of the twentieth, when the newspapers of wealthy entrepreneurs like Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst displaced the small, artisan prints that proliferated during the late eighteenth and early -to -mid-nineteenth centuries. It is not too bold to assume London had the examples of Pulitzer and (particularly) Hearst in mind, when he wrote the aforementioned critique on the media.

At first sight, it seems like an obvious deduction to relate Huxley’s vision of the future with the United States and Orwell’s with the Soviet Union. However, events like the Spanish-American War (1898), the McCarthyism of the 1950s and 60s, the Vietnam War and more recently George W. Bush’s National Security Strategy in the so-called War on Terror, can be fairly catalogued as Orwellian. Then again, they are probably not as Orwellian as the politics of the former Soviet Union, China and North Korea.

Together with James Burnham’s *The Managerial Revolution* (1941) – from which Orwell took the notion that the world would be divided into two or three super-states, so big and powerful that they would not be able to conquer or destroy each other – Yevgeny Zamyatin’s 1924 book *We* can be regarded as the most influential work on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In one passage of his 1946 review of *We*, Orwell stated: “The first thing anyone would notice about *We* is the fact – never pointed out, I believe – that Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* must be partly derived from it”. In Orwell’s opinion, it was *We*’s “intuitive grasp of the irrational side of totalitarianism” that made, “Zamyatin’s book superior to Huxley’s”.

It seems like all recent futuristic literature is a continuation of either Orwell or Huxley’s visions (or a mixture of both). Beyond the debate about whose is (or has been) more accurate, the fact that they remain as the most relevant references in this matter casts a light (or rather a shadow) on the societies of the present.

As Herold (2011) points out, the policies of surveillance and censorship in the Chinese Internet are defended with the argument that they are imposed in order to prevent China from turning into a decadent, hedonistic or Huxleyan society. Just as there is a tendency in the West to justify its flaws with ‘Well, at least we are not living under an Orwellian regime like China’.

Who was right? Orwell or Huxley? More than six decades have gone since the publication of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, more than three since the actual 1984, and the debate goes on. If, by chance, the reader is expecting an answer to what I consider to be an unanswerable question, I will now clarify how this part focuses on the *why* and not the *who* in this dilemma: why are Orwell and Huxley still so relevant despite all the political, physical and technological changes the world has experienced in the last six decades?

The most obvious answer seems to be: because despite all of the political, physical and technological changes, the societies of today are still very similar to those of the early to mid-twentieth century. This is, however, a debatable point, as there are various arguments, both optimistic and pessimistic, that would contradict my position. Amongst the pessimistic, Neill Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1986) stands out as one of the most relevant.

Postman’s main argument is that television was turning Western societies into an early version of the superficial, dulled by entertainment, hedonistic society portrayed in Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Thus, in the foreword of his book he stated that it was “about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right” (Postman, 1986, pp. vii-viii).

When Postman published his book, his arguments appeared as a response to the idealistic perception of electromagnetic media epitomised in McLuhan’s view of the world as a *global village*. Bringing the debate to the present, that is, to the early days of this so-called era of information, there are theorists like Malcolm Gladwell (2010) and Nicholas Carr (2008), who have recognised what might be described as Huxleyan features in the development of digital networks (similar to the ones Postman had recognised in television). Gladwell’s arguments are based on the assumption that online networks are built around “weak ties”. Thus, online networks not only do not help in the development of social activism, but they actually hamper social movements by trivialising what so far had been a serious thing: revolution. On the other hand, Carr’s arguments relate even closer to Postman’s, as he gained global notoriety for asking whether “Google is making us stupid?”

Besides from the Huxleyan features identified by the likes of Gladwell and Carr, Evgeny Morozov has recognised Orwellian threats within the model of online networks. These threats are summarised in two particular scenarios that evoke the plot of *Nineteen Eighty Four*: (a) how authoritarian regimes are *motivating* citizens to use digital networks to denounce whom they might consider to be an enemy of the state (e.g. the cases of the Chinese *Fifty-Cent-Army* and *Human-Flesh Search Engines* and the Thailand-based website *Protect the King*) and (b) how the omnipresence (or what some may call intrusiveness) of digital technologies can become an entrance for the State to invade the citizen’s private space. As Morozov points out, despite all “the good things” that can be said about Twitter, it is after all, a “public platform.” Thus, by organising protests via Twitter (or any other social network for that matter) the protesters are revealing critical information about themselves. Information that, as Morozov argues, “in the past States used to torture to get (and) now all they have to do is get on Facebook” (2011, p N/A).

5. Conclusion

After looking at these theories, the first conclusion that jumps to mind is that digital technologies are leading the democratic, industrialised West one step closer to Huxley’s *Brave New World*, while perpetuating an Orwellian state in the countries under authoritarian regimes.

Two decades have passed since the end of the Cold War and the fact that societies still differentiate themselves mainly based on geographical references (e.g., East vs. West) appears as evidence of how the national structures – which according to theorists like Innis and McLuhan started to form as we know them after the introduction of the printing press in Europe in the fifteenth century – are still standing strong.

So, what has changed since the publication of Huxley and Orwell’s dystopias? Can we *only* speak of *technological advances*? Hasn’t there been any social and/or cultural progress?

To go as far as to answer “yes” would mean to deny the importance of the Civil Rights Movement (which is something that the reader would hopefully realise is *not* amongst the aims of my essay); it would also contradict the work of Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker (2011) who exposes how violence has been steadily declining during the last centuries.

But still, the fear of humanity being doomed to bounce between Orwellian and Huxleyan futures lingers on and keeps morphing with the shape of new technologies.

At this stage, it is also important to point out how, to question whether there has *only* been *technological progress* in the late twentieth century, would be regarded as a fallacious argument by someone like Postman (1986), who stated that “only those who know nothing of the history of technology believe that a technology is entirely neutral” (p. 86).

During the lifetime of Huxley and Orwell, it was already a commonplace to say change was the only constant feature of modernism. Orwell and Huxley were aware of this, and I believe this partly explains why their works stand above the rest of the futuristic literature of the twentieth century. The real value of works like *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (and the really frightening thing about them) is not their accuracy in predicting the future (which is a point that can be endlessly debated) but their preciseness in portraying the societies of their present. What Huxley and Orwell did was to relate the social and political conditions of their lifetimes to what the technologies of the moment promised.

Then, if the nightmares of Orwell and Huxley are still so latent, it must mean we still haven't properly addressed what might be the most important question these authors left us: *What is progress?*

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Notes

¹The article included in The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell (2007), not to be confused with Hitchens' book Why Orwell Matters (2002).