1984: Worse Than Expected?

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1984

1. Slavery Is Freedom. How technology makes use of our own natural anxieties about it to promote its power over us.

During America's most highly watched television spectacle, the Super Bowl, viewers in ten major television markets were shown an advertisement from Apple Computer Corporation on the theme of George Orwell's *1984*. In the ad, the face of Big Brother speaks from a giant telescreen to a hall full of automatons (young people with fashionably shaven heads recruited for the role). Suddenly, a young woman runs into the room and hurls a sledgehammer through the screen, shattering it. A message follows, declaring a new model computer the machine which will ensure that the year 1984 cannot be come the nightmare world of Orwell's novel.

Another advertisement, this time for *Technology Illustrated* magazine, which appears to be popularizing high tech much in the same way that *Mechanics Illustrated* did for industrialism forty years ago, carries the same message to prospective subscribers. "It is a brave new world," it states, referring to Aldous Huxley's great dystopian novel which complements that of Orwell. "Where new technologies are changing the way we live, work and play. Where yesterday's science fiction fantasy is today's reality. And the significance of many technological advances escapes us."

Yet despite the terrifying implications of Huxley's vision of the future, there is no reason to fear, the ad tells us, since "those who do manage to keep up will find they've gained unprecedented control over the quality of their lives." And it concludes, "What about you? How will you keep the pace?" It never suggests what might be in store for those of us who don't manage to "keep the pace."

Of course there is something very unsettling about all of this—for example, the television commentator on the national news who reminded us that despite the many threats to privacy and the political manipulation we face, it is not the technology which is to blame. In fact, it is generally accepted that the only way to save ourselves from these threats is to apply more technology, as the advertisement recommends.

Somehow, the giant organizations which produce and disseminate all of this junk employ our very fear of technology to further its "unprecedented control" over our lives. The contemporary worship of this tremendous power arises from our actual powerlessness in the face of it, and the corporate-conjured image of our empowerment by technology corresponds directly to technology's disabling suppression of human action. "Taking control with technology" adds up to our complete surrender to it—its taking control of us.

Nowhere has this been more strikingly insinuated than in a recent advertisement/editorial from United Technologies. Speaking directly to the question of Orwell's vision of the future—a boot forever stamping on a human face—the anonymous corporate sorcerers reassure us, "Technology has not enslaved us. It has freed us." One cannot help but be suspicious when the power brokers of information, capital and technology defensively promote what is supposed to be an underpinning of modern society which should have no need of promotion. Could they be worried that people are beginning to question the universal hegemony of technology?

"What Orwell did not foresee," the advertisement continues, "was that information eventually could be stored on a chip smaller than a baby's fingernail." And chips, "like ordinary beach sand," are made of silicon—"one of the earth's most abundant elements." Nothing to worry about—miniaturization and dispersal somehow mystically prevent the possibility of control—so let's go to the beach! This widespread dissemination of computers, the organized power elite tells us, makes elite control impossible. "The electronic chip has put the power of the computer at the fingertips of virtually anyone who wants to expand the scope and clarity of his thinking. Because the chip increases our choices, it ensures individuality."

Of course, the corporations—these armed gangs—are not alone in their promotion of technology. The bandwagon has its generous sampling of sociologists, leftists and liberal reformers as well. Readers of the FE will remember the arguments of *Processed World* that there is "nothing inherently bad about computer technology," that computers could bring forms of decentralized planning which would "match needs to resources and pinpoint potential surpluses and shortfalls." (See the Vol. 15 No. 3 FE for an exchange between the FE and PW people; also "Marxism, Anarchism, and the New Totalitarianism" [FE #306, July, 1981] for a critique of the marxist defense of technology.)

More recently, Christopher Roper (described as "a freelance writer and consultant in information technology"), writes in the liberal-social democratic magazine *The Nation*, that notwithstanding the fact that the "potential of the microcomputer revolution is not yet understood," and "Nor do we understand what its full impact will be," radicals can only examine these "wide-ranging effects" in one way, that is to "get their hands on computers, familiarize themselves with their uses and limitations and prepare themselves for the inevitable changes ahead." ("Microcomputers and the Left," *The Nation*, 2/5/83.)

So, even though the phenomenon is little understood, leftists must join in the stampede, since whatever the significance of this revolution, it is inevitable. Roper reveals—as much by his professional credentials as by his consequent optimism—that for him the significance of communications technology and computers is positive. His argument is exactly the same as that of United Technologies: fears of informationalized totalitarianism are unrealistic since they "ignore the introduction of cheap microcomputers in the 1970s." Because of the availability of these computers, he writes, the multinational corporations "will no longer dominate the information field."

But we more than suspect that the widespread "availability" and use of personal computers is not at all a guarantee of freedom; nor does everyone have equal accessibility to this information, even if it were true that such information could save us. The present configurations of the computer industry in Silicon Valley and elsewhere make clear that, despite the idealist ideological descriptions of some fantastic destiny for technology once a few political kinks are worked out, the forms and hierarchy of labor and life actually being materialized reflect the dispossession and deepening degradation of labor, in which an unskilled, underpaid work force will do deadening jobs for a capital-intensive industry. (A dramatic portrayal of this trend was seen when an unemployed steel worker handed Reagan his resume during an official visit to Pennsylvania. Reagan found him a computer job with Radio Shack making less money than he did collecting unemployment benefits. He later quit when he was called back to the steel mill.)

It is not accidental that personal computers are being developed by United Technologies and other major corporations as the "embryos of the electronic work stations" visualized for the near future, as a recent article in *Technology Review* puts it. In the same article, Joseph Ferreira, a leading "management-information-systems" analyst explains that "Right now… the average Fortune 500 company probably has 200 to 300" personal computers. He expects that figure to double in a year.

So while on one level personal computers may make fantastic forms of surgery or well-tended mailing lists for worthy radical causes possible, the larger picture is one of social control. A manager will be able to tell how many errors a clerical worker (on a word processor, say) has made, what kind, what the average rate of output has been over a given period of time, and so on. A restaurant manager can tell how many bowls of soup a waitress has served, her overall receipt totals, and more. University programs have already been initiated to train experts in such computerized scientific management. People certainly do not need a computer readout to discern that they are being taken for a ride—if that were so, the battle would already be lost. Of course, that doesn't prevent them from flocking to the computer classes in a desperate effort to keep the pace; but an overall economic decline and an increasing rate of obsolescence guarantees that they are scrambling after a decreasing quantity of crumbs. Contrary to the

fantasies of Roper and others who disseminate capital's propaganda for free (and sometimes for a fee), the large institutions which can already summon huge amounts of technical expertise, money and information will always stay way ahead in the game.

2. Ignorance Is Strength. How social discourse conforms to the system of mechanized information.

Nor is it obvious that computerization and computers "expand the scope and clarity" of thinking, "increase choices," or "ensure individuality," as the propaganda claims. The "information" in which the technicized universe trades is not neutral; it is meaning itself which has been reshaped. Hence, the scope of thought is bound by the computer and its clarity can only be of a certain kind—what a fluorescent lamp is, say, to the entire light spectrum. The technology certainly does not increase choices—rather, it imposes its own limited, technological range of choices. Its very operation is a form of censorship; a repression, univocal and terrorist. It is not a neutral carrier or "medium" through which we pass a living, subtle and reciprocal communication; human discourse must be mutilated if it is to be transmitted by this machinery. It is, rather, a social code which demands obedience to its command. The computer may allow the "choice" of changing channels—but to do without it altogether becomes increasingly unthinkable.

The notion that this "information field" is a contested terrain is naive, to say the least. The very existence of such a "field"—in reality a web of abstract, instrumentalized social relations in which "information" reproduces itself through alienated human activity, just as the system of value reproduces itself through the false reciprocity of commodity exchange—is itself the essence of domination.

This information field isn't a card catalogue but the emerging environment of human discourse. Most writers on technology, be they its critics or promoters, see this as true. The description by Frederick Williams, a gladhander for high technology (whose facile book, *The Communications Revolution*, gave me the weary sensation of having watched television for several hours), is representative. He writes, "Increasingly we are living and working in an environment that is artifactual and electronic. We are rapidly fabricating a total psychological environment for ourselves."

This environment contains us; its "accessibility" is comparable to that of a machine to which we must be connected by electrodes. Ideology isn't simply transmitted to us by this vehicle; our participation in its functioning is the very source of ideology. Williams is at least partially correct when he explains, "The new political order is the communications infrastructure," though not surprisingly, he repeats the by now familiar shibboleth that the liberatory and the totalitarian "potential" of such technology depends on "the hand of the controller."

But if such media are an environment, neither the *1984* analogy nor the utopian technological vision can be accurate (though there is certainly more room for the totalitarian picture). As Jean Baudrillard serves in his essay "Requiem for the Media" (in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*), "It is useless to fantasize about state projection of police control through TV...; TV, by virtue of its mere presence, is a social control in itself. There is no need to imagine it as a state periscope spying on everyone's private life—the situation as it stands is more efficient than that: it is the certainty that people are no longer speaking to each other, that they are definitely isolated in the face of speech without a response." (emphasis in original) What is true of television is just as true of computers and QUBE (a kind of two-way) television, which simulate a response that is entirely shaped by the nature of the technology. Once we realize that this pseudo-communication represents the central code of alienated, totalitarian discourse, we must realize that its infrastructure and its result are mass society itself. (For a more in-depth discussion of this theme, see Jerry Mander's *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, Morrow, 1978.)

Hence while there may be reason for concern about computer threats to privacy, it is generally overlooked that deepening privatization, with a computerized television in every room as its apotheosis, is itself at least as great a threat—a threat which makes the police almost superfluous.

The capture and domestication of human meaning is reflected in the ways in which this process is discussed. It is worth quoting another messenger boy for high tech, John Diebold, to illustrate this point. In *Man and the Computer:*

Technology as an Agent of Social Change, Diebold accurately compares the present communications revolution to the industrial revolution, observing that such transformations affect "not only the means but also the ends of societal action." The new technologies, however, will have an even more profound effect because they "deal with the stuff of which society is made—information and its communication."

What Diebold takes for granted reflects how far this process has carried us. Since the emergence of mechanization, with the invention of the telegraph perhaps as a representative point of departure, communication has been degraded from a multifaceted, ambivalent, unique and reciprocal relationship between human beings to a repetitive and standardized transmission between machines. The complex dance that goes on among people within a kaleidoscopic, unfinished (in the sense of being open or dynamic) society, was reduced to a relation between mechanisms—an abstract, homogenous "message" passing between a unilateral transmitter and a passive receiver. It is this one-dimensional transmission which characterizes mass media and computers. The simulated response that such technology and its milieu allows ("feedback") has nothing in common with genuine human speech.

It is undeniable that reality has come to resemble this model, that human speech itself has been degraded. The discourse has shifted. As Jacques Ellul remarks in The Technological System, "It is the technological coherence that now makes up the social coherence." Previously the forces of domination were never able to gain hegemony over all of society; people maintained forms of solidarity and communitarian discourse which excluded power from their midst. The preeminence of technology, particularly meaning, creating "communication" technology, changes this, and all of human intercourse tends to be restructured along the lines of this petrified information and its communication.

The human being "participating" in this structure is reduced to parroting the code. Only the Machine, the Master's Voice, actually speaks. What is not reducible to the level of its technicized information is incoherent, and is utterly distorted if it does not disappear altogether. This parasite must finally consume its host. The model is imposed once and for all—no one remembers any other language.

So when Williams boasts that "Networks of telephones, telex, radio, and television have exponentially increased the density of human contact" (emphasis his), he has succeeded in turning the world on its head—or rather, has articulated that inverted, artificial world in which human contact has no density at all. The only density is that of machines, of a unitary machine, all loudspeakers and sirens. The human voice can no longer be heard through the din.

What manner of individuality can be ensured in such a terrain? Individuality itself becomes a commodity or function, manufactured and programmed by the system. All responses within it must become identical, quantifiable, assimilable to the code of power. One participates in mass society as a computer relay participates in the machine. The option remains for one to malfunction, but even this revolt tends to become derivative, and is guided by the forms which technology demands.

The image of teenage "hackers" breaking into the computer systems of a totalitarian state, for example, is little consolation. The nihilism of the computer vandals and burglars tends to flow from the nature of the technological system itself. While such disengaged, wanton acts of sabotage (such as altering drug dosages in computerized hospitals or vandalizing military and corporate programs regardless of the possible dangers), reveal a certain irreducibility of human beings to the uniformity of the machine, such nihilist reactions offer little in the way of a genuine alternative. They tend to represent instead that inevitable appearance of "a twin, a dark shadow-self," in Lewis Mumford's words, of the automaton which technological civilization has engendered. This is the individuality towards which computerized life drifts: narcissistic, privatized, alienated rage—a sadistic play far removed from the consequences of its unfocused, destructive impulses.

3. War Is Peace: What the Communications Revolution really portends.

The subject of destructive impulses brings us to the final slogan of Big Brother's triad: it has always been in warfare that modern mechanization has revealed its fundamental character. This is no less true of computer technology. Underlying all the fanfare about the high tech/communications revolution lies a much grimmer reality: an exterminist system slouching irresistibly towards war.

As the well-paid propagandists lull us to sleep, other technicians are busy studying the readouts of the variables in their attack scenarios. Beyond all the horrors of the war being waged against human autonomy lies this final solution, this ultimate omnicide prepared by the megamachine's technological roulette. Accordingly, it makes no difference whether the final war is initiated by computer error or by its perfect functioning—the only two possible modalities of the machinery, its entire range.

No computer warns of impending annihilation—the life force is not, and cannot be, programmed into them. And just as all of society tends towards its reduction to reified information and its circulation, so is it similarly reduced to a bureaucratic apparatus which has turned the "unthinkable" into business-as-usual. Its strategy reduces to inertia. No human considerations can influence this technological imperative; no dramatic descriptions of the consequences of such routine, everyday acts appear in the readouts; no passion moves the technicians from their course. As the archetypal nuclear bureaucrat, Herman Kahn has written (in *Thinking the Unthinkable*), "To mention such things may be important. To dwell on them is morbid, and gets in the way of the information."

A human utterance cannot be translated into this diminished vocabulary; where the discourse is curtailed to less than a shadow, so too are human beings. Only the circuitry acts; human response is suffocated.

4. 1984: The fiction and the reality.

As frightening as is the world pictured by Orwell, it ultimately falls short of the reality. The equipment and techniques employed by the totalitarian state in his novel are crude compared to the instruments available to today's police agencies, prison control units and data banks. While Reagan, in his typical Duckspeak, claims at his birthday party that "the cult of the state is dying," the cult of the state, and the scope of its powers, have probably never been greater. And just to make crystal clear the uncanny relationship between literary intuition and reality, on New Year's Day, 1984, the newspapers reported "a major expansion" by the FBI of a nationalized computerized file on people thought to be potential lawbreakers.

This superstate confronts us everywhere we turn. But focusing on the state apparatus alone evades a deeper problem: that social control, real-existing totalitarianism, proceeds from the very contours of our environment, the increasingly antihuman character of a world in which the milieux of mass communications and technology become the entire social terrain. The greatest force that totalitarianism has at its disposal is not its helicopter gunships or wiretapping, but its power to shape meaning, to extinguish resistance to it by defoliating pockets of culture which have not surrendered to its organized discourse and the tyranny of its one-way monologue. As long as even opposition is trapped within its technological discourse, domination will continue and widen.

That the information technology central to statist domination is now touted as our only means possible of response (a technological form which has somehow appeared "in the nick of time"), reveals sharply that technology is imposing its choices and forms on us, is pulling the ground out from beneath our feet.

By allowing our response to be imposed, we will only contribute to the consolidation of the pyramid. No amount of "information" can save us; already the barrage is overwhelming, and by plugging ourselves into it, we only join the chain gang. It grows as we shrink, feeding our lives to it.

Our only power lies in our ability to renew a human discourse based on community, solidarity and reciprocity, destroying the monopoly of speech enjoyed by the apparatus—destroying the universal deference to machines, experts and information. Such a response demands not only the abolition of politics and the economy, but the mass media and mass production system as well.

If we cannot abolish the code by recreating culture and meaning autonomously, we will suffer the inevitable outcome, be it machine-induced cataclysm, or mutilation beyond recognition of the human spirit. The practical result is the same. It's the Machine or us.

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