Beyond the Big Brother Metaphor: Rethinking Surveillance in the Age of Big Data

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This article analyses the concepts of Big Brother from George Orwell's novel Nineteen Eighty-Four and Big Other from American Sociologist Shoshana Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism. It contextualises totalitarianism and digital capitalism. Through a systematic comparison, it argues that both represent threats to individual autonomy created by asymmetric power and information enabled by technology. Though emerging from distinct contexts, Big Brother and Big Other have analytic value as cautionary tales regarding surveillance and social control. The analysis reveals that despite differing scope, Big Brother's overt coercion and Big Other's subtle manipulation lead to loss of privacy, freedom, and self-determination. However, possibilities exist to challenge such techno-authoritarianism through regulation, oversight, collective action, and democratic alternatives that restore control to citizens. Through a comparative study, the article provides insights into the need for democratic intervention against dangerous configurations of technology and power in the past, present, and future.

Key words: asymmetry of power, privacy, regulation, surveillance capitalism, totalitarianism.

Introduction

In his dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell presents Big Brother as an allegory for an inhuman totalitarian regime.

On the other hand, social scientist Shoshana Zuboff presents the concept of the Big Other as a representation of surveillance capitalism, which commodifies the personal privacy of individual autonomy for profit motive. However, both these concepts show how the accumulation of political or technological power is used to undermine individual autonomy, human rights, and democracy. This article aims to contextualise and compare these two concepts to understand the current intersection of technology, power, and information.

In a comparative analysis of the origins, mechanisms, and impact of Big Brother and the Big Other, this article attempts to argue that while one is a metaphor and the other a sociological concept, both figures reveal the dangers to individual autonomy caused by information and power asymmetries. This article explores the possibility of resistance and affirmative action to regain control over personal information lost to corporate capitalism or authoritarian regimes.

Beginning with an overview of how Big Brother and later the Big Other emerged as theoretical constructs, the article will systematically compare their modes of operation, effects on society and individuals, and the strengths and flaws of each framework for critically analysing technological power systems past and present. Ultimately, this article aims to establish that while differing in scope and context, the comparative analysis of Big Brother and the Big Other provides analytic value as cautionary tales about domination through new forms of mass surveillance.

Overview of Big Brother

George Orwell presented the concept of Big Brother in his famous dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, published in 1949. The novel is set in a fictional dystopian totalitarian state of Oceania. Big Brother is the state's enigmatic dictator who wields power over society through surveillance, propaganda, torture, and psychological manipulation. In the novel, the face of Big Brother is plastered throughout London to create an illusion of his omniscience. "It was one of those pictures which are so contrived that the eyes follow you about when you move. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption beneath it ran." (Orwell, 1949, p.4).

The image of Big Brother is an iconographic representation of the ruling party's doctrine, Ingsoc (English Socialism), which demands an individual's absolute servitude and loyalty. The regime uses technology like telescreens to monitor people. They use Thought Police to control and Newspeak to limit the cognitive and intellectual capabilities of the people. Dissenters are met with immediate and violent suppression. Staying in power is the only goal of Big Brother. Hence, any hint of individuality or independent thought is brutally and systematically crushed. Orwell writes, "The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power" (Orwell, 1949, p.333). As a result, people are bereft of the truth, history, empirical science and even the human spirit. Noam Chomsky stated: "The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum." (Chomsky, 2003, p.43). Similarly, in the world of Big Brother, the ideals of human reason, freedom, and dignity are lost.

Explanation of the Big Other

The concept of "Big Other" is formulated by sociologist Shoshana Zuboff in her analysis of a new form of capitalism, which she calls "surveillance capitalism". In her 2019 book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, she coined the term to signify the "asymmetry of power" between people and the large technology companies that constantly monitor and collect users' behaviour and profit from that data.

One of the descriptions Zuboff give to surveillance capitalism is "a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales" (Zuboff, 2019, p.8). She argues that tech companies like Google, Facebook and others collect mass data through surveillance technologies like cookies and smartphone applications. This data is processed to predict user behaviour, which is used to increase engagement.

Zuboff identifies components of surveillance capitalism. They are an endless collection of behavioural data, opaque algorithms that

analyse it to identify patterns and make inferences, and nudging techniques designed to shape user behaviour profitably. As Zuboff describes it: "Surveillance capitalists discovered that the most predictive data come from intervening in the state of play in order to nudge, coax, tune, and herd behaviour toward profitable outcomes" (p.15). The Big Other represents the asymmetrical power relationship in which technology companies know everything about users while their operations remain secretive to the public. "Big Other acts on behalf of an unprecedented assembly of commercial operations that must modify human behaviour as a condition of commercial success." (p.480). The aim is to accurately predict and secretly modify human behaviour on a mass scale to increase profits. Zuboff cites the example of Cambridge Analytica to prove her point. Cambridge Analytica was a political consulting company. In 2014, they worked with Facebook to get information about Facebook users. Facebook had data about people's interests and personalities based on what they liked or shared. Cambridge Analytica paid a researcher to make a quiz app. The app collected data not just from the people taking the quiz but also from their Facebook friends. Thus, Cambridge Analytica got private data from millions of Facebook users without their knowledge or consent. They used this data to target political advertisements and messaging for campaigns. For example, Cambridge Analytica worked for Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. The data helped them understand people's fears and beliefs. They used this knowledge to try to influence how people voted. This activity was brought to light by a researcher named Chris Wylie, who became a whistle-blower. The scandal followed facilitated questions on the invasion of privacy and the unethical use of technology to influence democratic processes. Facebook was criticised for not protecting user data or checking how it was used. Cambridge Analytica was shut down.

Comparative Analysis

Even though they emerged from different historical contexts, Big Brother and the Big Other are functional systems of surveillance and control. Both rely on the most cutting-edge technology to monitor individuals and collect data to predict and manipulate human behaviour. Both these systems thrive on information and power asymmetries.

The result of both these systems is the erosion of privacy, autonomy, and self-determination.

However, there are important distinctions between them. Orwell's Big Brother is a metaphor representing a centralised, totalitarian state apparatus dominating citizens through fear, torture, and rabid propaganda. He presents a world without pleasure or peace. Its primary goal is ideological conformity and obedience. According to writer Laurence Lerner: "To find the answer, we must begin from the total rejection of pleasure that gives the book its brilliant, nightmarish quality. Because pleasure is an individual experience, its elimination is necessary to the elimination of individuality." (Lerner, 2007, p.71)

The Big Other refers to the present reality of unethical exploitation of personal data by technology companies for sheer profit motive. Instead of overt coercion, these companies silently extract user data, which is commodified. Their primary objective is to profile and influence users' behaviour to maximise profit accurately. While Big Brother uses visible repressive force, exclusion, and censorship, the Big Other or surveillance capitalism works through inclusion, the pleasure of usage and convenience. These aspects enable it to disguise its unethical data extraction. For example, people use Facebook as a convenient medium to communicate with friends and family and as a source of entertainment. However, the seemingly 'free' service extracts the personal information of its users to push tailor-made advertisements and influence their behaviour. While both threaten human freedom, Big Brother is visible state power, Big Other is invisible and insidious technologically augmented capitalist control. Orwell and Zuboff use these concepts as provocative warning signs about concentrated power in the hands of a few.

Big Brother's Historical Context

George Orwell wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in the aftermath of World War II as totalitarian regimes were coming to power in different parts of the world. The novel is modelled on Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. Christopher Hitchens describes *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as:

A summa of what Orwell learned about terror and conformism in Spain, what he learned about servility and sadism at school and in the Burma police, what he discovered about squalor and degradation in The Road to Wigan Pier, what he learned about propaganda and falsity in decades of polemical battles. (Hitchens, 2008, p.148)

Orwell witnessed firsthand the devastating Spanish Civil War. He was also disillusioned by Soviet Communism under Stalin, which he saw as betraying socialist ideals through authoritarian methods. As Orwell wrote, "The Spanish war and other events in 1936-37 turned the scale, and thereafter I knew where I stood. Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism" (Orwell, 2005, p.145).

Nineteen Eighty-Four was his attempt through fiction to warn of the dangers of totalitarianism. In it Orwell famously wrote, " If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—for ever."(Orwell, 2021, p.338) He elaborates on oppression and mind control techniques, such as propaganda and historical revisionism. Big Brother is represented as a perfect dystopian system of complete power and surveillance. Today, the term Big Brother describes any totalitarian authority that uses excessive surveillance and threatens civil liberties. Though emerging from a particular political context, Orwell's metaphor still holds relevance in enlightening the possibility and dangers of totalitarianism, which uses authoritarian systems of control, oppression, and disinformation.

The Big Other's Contemporary Context

In contrast to Big Brother's overt political oppression, the Big Other concept emerges from the current digital ecosystem and present surveillance practices. Shoshana Zuboff observes it as "a new form of information capitalism aims to predict and modify human behaviour as a means to produce revenue and market control. "(Zuboff, 2015, p.14).

The digital revolution and the growth of social media led to the development of advanced algorithmic analysis and network communication technologies. Surveillance capitalists exploit these

technologies for profit. Zuboff states, "New possibilities of subjugation are produced as this innovative institutional logic thrives on the unexpected and illegible mechanism of extraction and control that exile persons from their own behaviour."(Zuboff, 2015, p.11)

Zuboff points to Google as the pioneer of the economic model, which used data collected from its search engine to develop targeted advertising. The unprecedented success of this business model made behavioural monitoring, online tracking and mass data aggregation became widespread among tech companies after that. The lack of regulation helped surveillance capitalism thrive. Zuboff coined the term "Big Other" as a part of her critique of these corporate practices, which "claim human experience as raw material free for the taking". (Zuboff, 2019, p.175)

Unlike Big Brother, Big Other represents an economic model that lures people by offering free services and convenience to extract personal information. Zuboff theorises that these asymmetries of information and power created by Big Other or surveillance capitalism threaten individual autonomy. Though emerging from different conditions, the Big Other causes the concentration of information and control of the population in a few, similar to the dangers foreshadowed by Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Methods of Control and Coercion

Big Brother and Big Other rely on different methods of control and coercion. Big Brother utilises visible repressive techniques, including propaganda, censorship, and physical and mental torture. Propaganda disseminated by the Ministry of Truth targets people's reason. Texts are altered to align with the party's doctrine. Loyalty rituals like "Two Minutes Hate "create manufactured hatred towards the party's enemies. The Ministry of Love enforces obedience through torture. Thus, an individual's identity and free thought are effectively curtailed.

On the other hand, according to Zuboff, the Big Other achieves control through more subtle techniques. Technology companies monitor user behaviour and collect data. They exploit the legal grey area created by the absence of effective regulation. This data is processed

using "opaque" algorithms to identify probabilistic predictions about the actions and desires of users. Finally, the Big Other uses nudging techniques to persuade users to profitable behaviours or choices. As Zuboff writes, "It is no longer simply about ubiquitous computing. Now the real aim is ubiquitous intervention, action, and control. The real power is that now you can modify real-time actions in the real world". (Zuboff, 2019, p.277). These systems operate silently, automatically shaping perspectives and decisions. While Big Brother's face instils dread, the Big Other's algorithms quietly tune, herd, and modify people's behaviour in favour of corporate interests. This ultimately results in the loss of individual autonomy.

Asymmetries of Power

Central to Big Brother and Big Other are severe asymmetries of power and knowledge between the surveillant and the 'surveilled'. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the party headed by Big Brother possesses absolute power. They monitor citizens through networks of telescreens, thought police and indoctrinated spies. In the novel, O'Brian, an inner party member, declares, "We are the priests of power.... God is power" (Orwell,1949, p.334). While the citizens are entirely transparent to the state, it remains completely opaque. This power imbalance destroys the citizens' capability to understand truth as reality is only a construct of Big Brother.

The Big Other uses digital surveillance to create novel forms of asymmetries of power and knowledge. According to Zuboff, this is the cardinal principle of surveillance capitalism. She writes, "Surveillance capitalism operates through unprecedented asymmetries in knowledge and the power that accrues to knowledge. Surveillance capitalists know everything about us, whereas their operations are designed to be unknowable to us." These concepts show dehumanising power that individuals cannot engage or hold accountable. They show power operating based on one-way visibility. They also reveal the consequence of democracy's failure to curtail unbridled power accumulation.

Impact on Individuals

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Big Brother breaks down individual autonomy by subjecting them to physical and psychological terror. Tactics like torture and thought control render people incapable of individuality and critical thinking. Every shred of individuality is systematically eliminated from society. Conformity and complacency are the norm.

On the other hand, Big Other has not reached the metaphorical dystopia Orwell portrays. Here, the success of surveillance lies in being invisible. Targeted advertisements and personalised recommendations aim to be as invisible as possible. They do not want the illusion of the free will of the user to shatter. The Big Other offers convenience and entertainment according to the user's sensibility. Social media feeds of YouTube, Facebook and Instagram are real-life examples of this process. These social media platforms cater personalised feeds for each user based on the information gathered through surveillance about the user's preferences, with the primary objective of prolonging engagement with the platform. They have limited concern regarding the quality and psychological impact of the content on the user. Often, unsophisticated users have the illusion that platforms suggest content uniformly to every user while the exact opposite is true, thus reinforcing biases and prejudices in the user. American sociologist Zeynep Tufekci says:

> As we are not prisoners, the model of control sought by these systems is not one of pure fear, as in George Orwell's 1984, but rather an infrastructure of surveillance (and targeted fear aimed at "underclass" subgroups) along with direct overtures toward obtaining assent and legitimacy through tailored, fine–tuned messaging.(Tufekci, 2014, p.15)

Thus, both figures reveal how technology-augmented power can insidiously undermine human agency, though to differing degrees and through distinct mechanisms of control.

Ways of Challenging Domination

Despite the grave threats posed by totalising systems like Big Brother or the Big Other, possibilities exist to challenge their

domination and imagine alternative futures. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston says:

> Everywhere, all over the world, hundreds or thousands or millions of people just like this . . . people who had never learned to think but were storing up in their hearts and bellies and muscles the power that would one day overturn the world. If there was hope, it lay in the proles! (Orwell, 1949, p.278).

Here, Orwell uses the term prole to signify the proletariat, the working class. It suggests Orwell's hope for the power of the common man to fight against tyranny. Orwell, a self-declared democratic socialist, was prompt in alerting the excess of official power. His works are a testament to his unwavering devotion to democracy and individual freedom. They help to identify totalitarian and authoritarian tendencies.

American academic and researcher on the depiction of technology, Prof. Nicholas Kelly, calls for a complete revision of portraying digital surveillance in creative works. He argues that the model of Big Brother heavily influences the depiction of surveillance activities. According to Kelly, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Big Brother remain cultural touchstones for understanding and visualising surveillance. In the age of digital surveillance, it is necessary to move past the Big Brother metaphor as it does not accurately reflect the realities of data-driven algorithmic surveillance capitalism. The concept of Big Brother perpetuates the notion of active individualised surveillance systems, whereas, in reality, surveillance capitalism functions with the help of the most cutting-edge digital technology. It is impersonal and efficient, unlike any individualised surveillance system. A change in the portrayal of the surveillance model will create awareness regarding the true capability of surveillance capitalism. (Kelly, 2022)

German sociologist and academic Prof. Markus Kienscherf critiques Shoshana Zuboff's position of surveillance capitalism as an aberration from traditional capitalism. According to Kienscherf, the business model of platforms like Facebook and Google originates from traditional capitalism's appetite for endless accumulation. For the

surveillance capitalist data is the core asset. User data is collected, refined, and processed through technology into consumer profiles. These are used for targeted advertisements or sold to advertisers. Surveillance capitalists accumulate surplus value from expropriating user data and the labour that renders it into commodities. Kienscherf argues that this does not exploit user labour but rather expropriates user data similar to primitive accumulation processes that disposed working class people of land, and resources to enable capitalist growth. However, ultimately, surveillance capitalism depends on people's purchasing power. Its reliance on cutting-edge technology and automation may undermine consumer purchasing power, paradoxically affecting profit generation. (Kienscherf, 2022)

In a 2022 follow-up paper titled *Surveillance Capitalism or Democracy? The Death Match of Institutional Orders and the Politics of Knowledge in Our Information Civilization*, Shoshana Zuboff argues that the core problem of surveillance capitalism is the commodification of human behaviour. Surveillance capitalism has undergone four development stages spanning over two decades, expanding its economic operation, governance, and social harm. According to Zuboff, effective opposition requires "contradiction strategies" to halt surveillance capitalism's growth. However, current strategies like content moderation are inadequate. She argues that the "golden sword" strategy is to legally abolish large-scale extraction of personal data to prevent the commodification of human behaviour. This is the only practical solution to curtail harms like loss of privacy, algorithmic inequality, and behaviour manipulation. It would also remove surveillance capitalism's incentives.

There are signs of growing democratic resistance in places like the European Union, where legislators and activist groups demand a ban on business practices based on surveillance. Ultimately, society must tie information infrastructure with democratic values. Instead of technological determinism, a view of technology conforming to the people's collective will through democratic institutions and oversight is necessary. The collective democratic effort to prioritise public good rather than profits has yielded favourable results. Reclaiming autonomy solely depends on collective awareness and action. (Zuboff, 2022)

Conclusion

In comparing the concepts of Big Brother and Big Other, this analysis reveals how both figures symbolise threats to individual autonomy with the help of asymmetric power and superior technology. It also shows that they operate through different mechanisms created by their historical contexts.

Big Brother represents an overtly coercive totalitarian system that crushes dissent. It wields power through propaganda and terror. In contrast, Big Other emerged from the present-day digital age. It subtly influences behaviour using opaque algorithms, customised content, and addictive design. Its power comes from information asymmetries and technological superiority. While Big Brother coerces and Big Other nudges undermine self-determination and the democratic process. However, citizens can challenge such hegemony through a collective democratic process. As digital technologies expand their reach, informed public debate is essential. Comparing Big Brother and Big Other illustrates how technologies can augment power in ways dangerous to democratic societies. Democracy demands vigilance, not technological determinism.

In conclusion, by contextualising and distinguishing Big Brother and Big Other, this analysis provides a cautionary tale regarding unbridled technological power's threats to freedom. Emerging technologies are not neutral. Their risks are shaped by those who are controlling them. Democratic intervention is necessary to prevent technological domination and reclaim it as a tool for human welfare.

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