

GEORGE ORWELL WAS RIGHT: 1984 HAPPENED AND NO ONE NOTICED

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October 13, 2017



Equifax collected the most-private information on half of all Americans and gave it to the bad guys. Facebook and Google took advertising money from Russians looking to manipulate the presidential election. Twitter was gamed by masters of misinformation. Were these organizations merely asleep at the wheel or were they blinded by the bottom line? Neither is an acceptable answer and in either case, they are a reflection of the Orwellian reality in which we now find ourselves.

In 1984, I was working as an editor on the general news desk at The Associated Press when the agency did a story that 1984 is here and George Orwell was wrong. Big Brother is not watching, as he warned in his classic novel “Nineteen Eighty-Four.” Little did we know that Orwell was not wrong; his prediction was just a couple of decades premature. And little did we know that our democracy would be challenged not by jackboots and guns but rather by clicks, tweets, bots and posts.

Just days apart, we found out that 143 million Americans had their personal information stolen from Equifax, the credit-monitoring giant, and that Russians had purchased advertising on Facebook and manipulated Twitter in a way that led to fake news posts intended to influence the presidential election. When the AP said in 1984 that Orwell was wrong, it was before email, cell phones, texts and social media existed. Our democracy can now be compromised in frighteningly subtle and sinister ways.

In our brave new world, there is a record of everything we do. Everything. Every credit card purchase, every website visited, every cell phone call, every email and text sent can be found and traced. EZ Pass toll receipts have been used in divorce proceedings. “Mr. Smith, why did you cross the George Washington Bridge at 2:37 p.m. on Thursday Sept. 21, 2015?” Technology has thrown open a dangerous door that needs to be partially closed, or at least strictly monitored.

When I travel to a golf tournament my computer knows where I am and I start receiving targeted advertising for local businesses. More and more telemarketers have my cell phone number. Without my consent, people who make money off me make even more money off me by selling the

information they have gathered on me to other people who want to make money off me.

This grand compromise of personal privacy came to be not as part of some elaborate conspiracy, but rather as a result of blind loyalty to “progress” without considering the consequences. As our lives became digitized no one appreciated the risks. No one factored in cybercrime. Those who monetized progress cared only about profits. Gathering and selling information about each of us, long a money-making venture, has become more dangerous as it has become more efficient.

No one understood that technology was compiling a master list for criminals to use. No one grasped that social media was providing a platform for devious agents – foreign and domestic – to manipulate public opinion by blurring the line between journalism and propaganda. No one acknowledged that the bad guys could cripple us by hacking into the electrical grid or the banking system. Or if they did understand, they didn’t tell us.

Balzac said: “Behind every great fortune there lies a great crime.” The crime here that has led to the creation of many great fortunes in the tech world is the theft of our privacy under the guise of putting us in greater contact with each other. Is there anything we can do about this? Can this

toothpaste be put back into the tube? That's a question for someone far wiser than me.

What I do know is that the constant cries of "Fake News" raised by presidential tweet and reinforced almost daily from behind the podium in the White House briefing room only serves to help the bad guys. There is fake news out there and has been for decades. It's called disinformation, which is the word used to describe the way intelligence agencies spread false information to deliberately shape public opinion.

There is a reason that journalism is the only profession with Constitutional protection. Freedom of the press stands at the frontline in the defense of our overall freedom. The founders knew that change comes from the bottom up and not the top down -- or at least should. And the fuel for that change frequently comes in the form of the spotlight placed on a problem by a free press. Recent attacks on the First Amendment are chilling and need to be taken seriously.

A free and unfettered press not only protects our freedom, it ensures progress. The government did not enact child labor laws; workplace safety regulations; auto safety standards, tobacco laws and more until the people demanded the changes. And in all cases an aggressive press

played a key role in educating the public about the nature of the problem.

There were many courageous journalists who put their lives on the line to report the Civil Rights movement. There have been journalists killed by organized crime. War correspondents are a special breed of heroes. The scope of child sexual abuse and its cover-up in the Catholic Church was revealed by the Boston Globe, despite pressure from the powerful to turn a blind eye to the problem.

Can we make it 1983 again? Nope. History doesn't work that way. Can we count on the government to demand greater security protections for social media and the likes of Equifax? Nope. Not unless the people demand it, and that won't happen unless a free and aggressive press exposes the true depth of the problem.

We can't put the toothpaste back in the tube. But we can begin to clean up the mess. The first step toward reigning in the Orwellian forces that control our lives is to expose the extent to which our privacy has been compromised and the degree to which our attitudes have been manipulated. Otherwise, it will be 1984 forever.