# OPINION: We're Living '1984' Today

(CNN) -- It appears that the police now have a device that can read license plates and check if a car is unregistered, uninsured or stolen. We already know that the National Security Agency can dip into your Facebook and Google searches. And it seems that almost every store we go into these days wants your home phone number and ZIP code as part of any transaction.

So when Edward Snowden -- now cooling his heels in Russia -- revealed the extent to which the NSA is spying on Americans, collecting data on phone calls we make, it's not as if we should have been surprised. We live in a world that George Orwell predicted in "1984." And that realization has caused sales of the 1949, dystopian novel to spike dramatically upward recently -- a 9,000% increase at one point on Amazon.com.

Comparisons between Orwell's novel about a tightly controlled totalitarian future ruled by the ubiquitous Big Brother and today are, in fact, quite apt. Here are a few of the most obvious ones.

Telescreens -- in the novel, nearly all public and private places have large TV screens that broadcast government propaganda, news and approved entertainment. But they are also two-way monitors that spy on citizens' private lives. Today websites like Facebook track our likes and dislikes, and governments and private individuals hack into our computers and find out what they want to know. Then there are the ever-present surveillance cameras that spy on the average person as they go about their daily routine.

The endless war -- In Orwell's book, there's a global war that has been going on seemingly forever, and as the book's hero, Winston Smith, realizes, the enemy keeps changing. One week we're at war with Eastasia and buddies with Eurasia. The next week, it's just the opposite. There seems little to distinguish the two adversaries, and they are used primarily to keep the populace of Oceania, where Smith lives, in a constant state of fear, thereby making dissent unthinkable -- or punishable. Today we have the so-called war on terror, with no end in sight, a generalized societal fear, suspension of certain civil liberties, and an ill-defined enemy who could be anywhere, and anything.

Doublethink -- Orwell's novel defines this as the act of accepting two mutually contradictory beliefs as correct. It was exemplified by some of the key slogans used by the repressive government in the book: War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength. It has also been particularly useful to the activists who have been hard at work introducing legislation regulating abortion clinics. The claim is that these laws are only to protect women's health, but by forcing clinics to close because of stringent regulations, they are effectively shutting women off not only from abortion, but other health services.

Newspeak -- the fictional, stripped down English language, used to limit free thought. OMG, RU serious? That's so FUBAR. LMAO.

Memory hole -- this is the machine used in the book to alter or disappear incriminating or embarrassing documents. Paper shredders had been invented, but were hardly used when Orwell wrote his book, and the concept of wiping out a hard drive was years in the future. But the memory hole foretold both technologies.

Anti-Sex League -- this was an organization set up to take the pleasure out of sex, and to make sure that it was a mechanical function used for procreation only. Organizations that promote abstinence-only sex education, or want to ban artificial birth control, are the modern versions of this.

So what's it all mean? In 1984, Winston Smith, after an intense round of "behavior modification" -- read: torture -- learns to love Big Brother, and the harsh world he was born into. Jump forward to today, and it seems we've willingly given up all sorts of freedoms, and much of our right to privacy. Fears of terrorism have a lot to do with this, but dizzying advances in technology, and the ubiquity of social media, play a big part.

There are those who say that if you don't have anything to hide, you have nothing to be afraid of. But the fact is, when a government agency can monitor everyone's phone calls, we have all become suspects. This is one of the most frightening aspects of our modern society. And even more frightening is the fact that we have gone so far down the road, there is probably no turning back. Unless you spend your life in a wilderness cabin, totally off the grid, there is simply no way the government won't have information about you stored away somewhere.

What this means, unfortunately, is that we are all Winston Smith. And Big Brother is the modern surveillance state.

# As Orwell foretold, Kim Jong Il is watching you

**Ben Macintyre** – The Times
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A single photograph has become the symbol of North Korea's utter darkness, moral, political, economic and technological. It shows the two Koreas at night by satellite. The cities of the South are ablaze with electric light. In the North, there is only a single, dim pinprick of illumination, the capital Pyongyang; surrounded by a black void, a country hidden from sight, held prisoner in the dark, a vast memory hole.

Here is another image that precisely captures the nature of life under the North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il, the self-styled Dear Leader: "There will be no curiosity, no enjoyment of the process of life ... If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face ... for ever."

That line is from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. George Orwell finished writing his masterwork in 1948, the year that separate governments were formed in North and South Korea. He wrote the short book, he said, out of fear that "totalitarianism, if not fought against, could triumph anywhere". Some critics pooh-poohed his warnings. By 1984, the *New Left Review* predicted, the book would be a mere "curio". The critics were partly right. By 1984 the seeds of perestroika were already undermining the great Stalinist machine of oppression. Saddam Hussein attempted to create his own autocratic dystopia in Iraq, but he was only ever an amateur Big Brother.

There is only one country in the world where Orwell's fears have come close to realisation, and that is North Korea. Indeed, to outsiders, the totalitarian horror of that brutalised place can seem like fiction. As revealed in a number of new books about North Korea — most notably Barbara Demick's extraordinary reportage in *Nothing to Envy* — Orwell predicted almost every aspect of the planet's nastiest political regime.

North Korea is a state whose very survival depends on propaganda and mass mind control, the threat of war, constant surveillance, brainwashing, censorship, the absence of individual rights and the repression of individuality itself. Kim's exhortations to his benighted people — "Let's live our own way", "Adore Kim Jong Il with all your heart" — are echoes of the slogans of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "War is peace", "Freedom is slavery", "Ignorance is strength".

There is no personal privacy in North Korea. Any perceived transgression against the regime is punishable by death, or at least indefinite incarceration. Evenings are spent in indoctrination classes and factory breaks are devoted to "hate" sessions; spying on the neighbours is a patriotic duty; at political rallies, officials scan the faces of the faithful to detect any hint of scepticism.

The only splashes of colour in the drab landscape are the propaganda posters demanding ever more abject subservience to the absurd, bouffant-haired Kim, who sits in his palace, drunk on power, French wine and Western pornography.

"Thoughtcrime does not entail death. Thoughtcrime is death," Winston Smith writes in his journal. The same is true in North Korea. In the political camps, informers report disloyal "sleep-talk" to the Thought Police. When Winston Smith awakens in his cell, screaming his forbidden love for his beloved Julia, he is sent to Room 101.

While the North Korean version of Orwell's Ministry of Plenty insists that life for its citizens is steadily improving, the people starve. The famine that engulfed North Korea in 1990s was entirely preventable, a spectacular crime against humanity that left a permanent biological legacy: the malnourished inhabitants of North Korea are, on average, some six inches shorter than their cousins in the South.

Like Big Brother's regime in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Kim's power is maintained by a combination of ignorance, fear and racial hatred. As B. R. Myers shows in *The Cleanest Race*, the North Korean dictatorship is no longer communist but an old-fashioned, race-based extreme nationalism of a sort that Europeans should easily recognise. Kim Jong Il owes more to Hitler than to Stalin.

The "enemy" is depicted as racially inferior, rapacious American "jackals". This "perpetual war" is what fuels the State, and ensures that negotiations over North Korea's nuclear capability are doomed: Pyongyang relies on its nuclear tests, not for military purposes but because paranoia is its political raison d'etre.

In North Korean schools, children learn mathematics by totting up tallies of dead American soldiers: "With the guns that I make with my own hands, I will shoot them, Bang, Bang, Bang," they sing.

Orwell died 60 years ago last month. "Orwellian" has since become an easy cliché of the sort he abhorred, yet even he might have allowed its application to North Korea, the only place where his nightmare fantasy approaches everyday reality.

"There are three stages in your reintegration," Winston Smith is told. "There is learning, there is understanding, and there is acceptance." Have the brainwashed North Koreans accepted? Do they love Big Brother? Certainly millions do. In 2004, when a train carrying explosives blew up in North Korea setting fire to nearby houses, it was reported that several people died trying to save portraits of the "Dear Leader" from the burning buildings.

Painting a grim picture of cradle-to-grave indoctrination, Demick wonders: "Who could possibly resist?" Yet as she shows in the stories of six who escaped, resistance is still possible, though virtually impossible to measure in a country without internet or mobile telephones. There are Winstons and Julias in the North Korean darkness, small twinkles of defiance, invisible to the naked eye.

Though they whisper it in secret, there is a saying that North Koreans live "like frogs in a well". The joke, tragically, is lost on a younger generation of North Koreans: by 1995 virtually every frog in the country had been eaten.

# Blasting the Communist Party line in rural China

Calum MacLeod, USA TODAY 1:10 a.m. EDT June 21, 2014

MIYUN COUNTY, China — In Pingchang village, a small farming community two hours' drive fromBeijing, no one can sleep through the Communist Party's 7 a.m. wake-up call.

"Building socialist core values is everyone's common responsibility," barks a radio broadcast from public loudspeakers installed this spring for a nationwide campaign to blast the party's voice into every rural home.

The broadcast — three times a day — consists of an hour of deafening propaganda and news, sprinkled with songs and often curious advice. Adopt the "correct walking posture", the broadcaster explains, with feet neither splayed nor pigeon-toed.

And always remember to be "civilized, polite Beijingers," the woman's voice says at an ear-splitting volume.

Some farmers say the daily programs — at 7 a.m., 11:30 a.m. and 6 p.m. — mark an unwelcome return to the days of Chairman Mao Zedong.

"Sometimes society does go backward," complains Cai Zhishen, 48, who remembers similar, quieter broadcasts that ended more than three decades ago. "It's extremely annoying, but this is government policy, so there's nowhere for us to hide."

The ongoing campaign highlights the stark contrasts between urban and rural China. Half of China's 1.3 billion people now live in cities, where authorities increasingly respond to citizens' growing concerns over noise pollution. This month, anxious parents in a Chongqing high-rise managed to halt the elevators so the sound wouldn't disturb their teenagers before taking college entrance exams.

In the countryside, farmers are treated differently, in multiple ways, including the revival of this old-fashioned propaganda method. The ruling party uses its new network to relay familiar messages about harmony and dedicated, effective officials, while the government says it helps handle "emergency incidents" — which likely include protests as well as natural disasters and extreme weather.

Official details remain sparse about the project called "Every Village Loud," but the business website hc360.com reported last year that its broadcast coverage remains below 30% in most provinces, far below goals set in the Communist Party's latest five-year-plan.

In Miyun County, northeast of Beijing, the government-run radio and television center claims it has complete rural coverage, after spending $6 million to set it up, and says its programs receive a warm welcome.

The campaign delivers "an abundant spiritual and cultural feast," the Miyun center says, yet abuse is never far away in China's graft-laden system. A party secretary in northeastern Jilin province used the broadcast network to instruct villagers to attend his granddaughter's 1-month birthday feast. They felt obliged to leave cash gifts, totaling over $3,000. But after news reports of what happened, he was fired last year.

In southern Hunan province's Sangzhi county, "the party's sound is incessant, the villagers beam with heart-felt joy," the Hunan Daily reported in November. Village elder and party secretary Shang Benwu heard the same broadcast about a party meeting more than 10 times. "The more he listens, the more energy he has," said the state-run newspaper.

Complaints about the campaign only occasionally surface in China's state-run media.

"It's much quieter now," laughs He Fangxia, 49, a farmer and party member, over the din of Pingchang's evening broadcast. When the loudspeakers first sounded this year, complaints to local leaders by He and many other villagers succeeded in lowering the volume, and delaying the day's first broadcast from 6 a.m. to 7 a.m, she says.

"People are too busy to watch TV, but even if you are working in a remote field, you can still listen," says He, who tried her own hand at community broadcasting a few years ago, on an earlier loudspeaker network that still operates sporadically. The new, more powerful system offers useful weather forecasts, plus tips on planting and child-raising, she says.

Older residents in Huayuan, a nearby village, "complain the broadcasts are 'too early and noisy, we want to sleep, and the health advice is boring or hard to follow,'" innkeeper Zhao Haiyang, 26, says. "My baby daughter likes the music, and I like the news best, to find out how to attract more tourists," says Zhao, 26. He admits to being lucky enough not to have a loudspeaker close to his inn, forcing him to walk a few minutes in order to hear it clearly.

"The volume must be cut, you can't keep disturbing the people," says Li Guozhu, a Pingchang restaurant owner and innkeeper, who resents the "compulsory nature" of the broadcasts. "Now we have TV and the Internet, we should have a choice. So if people want to listen they can install a speaker at home, and a switch," says Li, 59, who recalls the loudspeakers that used to shout sayings of Chairman Mao.

"I want Miyun People's Radio to send a reporter to get local feedback," he says. "They may not broadcast the report, but the county leaders would know." Most village residents appear resigned to the new soundscape.

Even critics such as Cai look for positives, such as information on food to help fight diabetes. "All I can do is hope they turn it off one day," Cai says. "And at least I don't need a watch anymore. When it starts, wherever I am, I know what the time is.

## North Korea Watching

More than a decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, North Korea has the dubious distinction of being the world's most isolated nation and the last standing Stalinist state.

Experts studying the reclusive communist nation have had to frequently resort to what is called "North Korea watching," a complex quasi-science whose methodology for the most involves grabbing at the shreds of information released — or more often leaked — from the secretive state and worrying about its likely import.

But late last month, North Korea watchers received a particularly delectable morsel in their perennial quest for information, when a refugee fleeing to China brought with him an officially printed phone book bearing approximately 50,000 names and numbers.

According to Time magazine, the phone book was the sort only available to high-ranking North Korean officials — the first and only such directory to find its way to the West.

While the identity of the escapee was not released, the phone book ended up in Japan, from where Time obtained a copy of the 373-page, reportedly dog-eared 1995 directory.

Although he has not seen the book, Kim Choong Nam of the Hawaii-based East-West Center says the contents of the directory were described to him and from what he could deduce, the book provides a rare glimpse into the mechanics of how the "Dear Leader" controls his people.

"North Korea is a closed society and information is not available," he says. "So, if we can carefully analyze a telephone directory, we can get a lot of information — at least about the way the North Korean regime functions, its level of control, and how the society is organized and operates."

Inside an Informer Society

And if the book is anything to go by, North Korean society today looks like a sinister replay of George Orwell's 1984.

According to Time, the Pyongyang city section of the directory lists a series of government-run 24-hour informant hotlines on which North Koreans can rat on their family, friends and neighbors at any time of the day or night.

Since the 1989 revolutions that tore through Eastern Europe, many former communist states have been opening up their state archives to reveal the grisly details of "informer societies" masterminded and managed by an all-knowing, all-powerful state.

But even by Cold War standards, experts say Kim's informant network takes the cake.

"North Korea, as far as anyone can tell, is state of the art," says Nicholas Eberstadt, a North Korea expert at the Washington-based American Enterprise Institute. "It's as close to a Big Brother society as a society populated by human beings can possibly be. There are multiple competing secret police who spy on the people and on each other. So, no one can relax and have a private life."

## An Eye on the Economic Pie

Although it remains notoriously difficult to gauge what private life in North Korea is like, by many accounts, the situation facing an estimated 24 million North Korean citizens is bleak.

Humanitarian groups estimate that a long-standing famine has killed nearly 2 million North Koreans since 1995.

Under the ideology of juche, or self-reliance, the North Korean economy is crumbling and the government's abysmal credit rating has been exacerbated by a traditionally high military budget.

Many experts warn that Kim's surprisingly frank act of contrition this week comes with an eye on potential Japanese aid to help alleviate North Korea's economic pain.

"On the positive ledger, this will raise the hopes of a lot of people wishing to engage the North Korean leadership in a reform process," says Eberstadt. "On the negative ledger, it remains to be seen how much money — how much ransom — Japan pays. If Japan pays a yen or more in return for the safety of the kidnap victims, this will be seen as a new frontier in North Korea's blackmail politics."