

Orwell's Problem

I. Introduction

The acquisition of human knowledge is dependent on the ability to communicate evidence effectively to individuals and groups in society. While communication is achieved through various means, it is argued that the human language is the primary tool for communication¹. Spoken and written language have played key roles in the transfer of human knowledge across geography, culture, and historical period.

In *Knowledge of Language (1986)*, Chomsky, on the topic of human knowledge, introduced Orwell's problem, namely "the problem of explaining how we can know so little, given that we have so much evidence"². This statement is built on three key implications:

1. There is a method by which evidence is discovered, and that evidence contributes to human knowledge.
2. There is a mechanism which communicates, or "gives" the evidence.
3. There is a recipient, "we", to whom the evidence is communicated, or "given".

From this framework, the natural explanation to Orwell's problem is that a miscommunication has occurred, either with the mechanism used to communicate the evidence, a problem with "*the giver*", or the recipient, "*the receiver*" in interpreting the evidence.

However, the nature of communication differs greatly across societies and periods. Firstly, the scope of communication and use of language is largely influenced by political systems; there are discrepancies in **what** evidence is communicated and **how** evidence is communicated between totalitarian and democratic societies.

¹ Nelson, K., & Nelson, R. R. (2003). The Cumulative Advance of Human Know-How. *Philosophical Transactions: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences*, 361(1809), 1635–1653.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3559214>

² Chomsky, N. (1986). *Knowledge of language: Its nature, origin and use*. New York: Praeger, p. 27.
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/13T-uOMR6SuO-pJJ730Nq6T5jks525Ue/view>

Secondly, technological advancement greatly influences the method of communication across different time periods. Communication in Orwell's 1950s society was dominated by the radio, primitive televisions, and newspapers, whereas communication in the current age is largely characterised by social media³. The variance in the medium of communication thus influences the form in which language takes shape.

The contrast in scope and method of communication across different contexts thus impacts the givers and receivers of evidence, and the miscommunication and misuse of language which arises between the givers and receivers forms the basis of Orwell's problem.

II. Political systems and Scope of Communication

Communication plays a critical role in the political sphere of any society; it is *how* a society's government connects with its citizens. In accordance with the giver-receiver analogy, the government would be *the giver*, and the citizens *the receiver*. Therefore, any dominant political power in turn, heavily influences *what* is being communicated in that society.

But what is the incentive for governments to communicate with their citizens? Locke argued in *Second Treatise of Government* that governments existed to promote public good, and protect the "life, liberty and property of people"⁴. That logic requires a government that understands the needs of its people, which effective communication should facilitate. While this holds true, it is argued that governments are likewise incentivised by their political aim of maintaining power. Downs instead argues "they [political parties] formulate policies and serve interest groups in order to gain office"⁵. Following this logic, governments are incentivised to communicate with interest groups to identify and address their needs in order to maintain support.

³ Buchanan, R. Angus (2020, November 18). The 20th and 21st centuries. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/technology/history-of-technology/The-20th-and-21st-centuries>

⁴ Locke, J. (1689). *Second Treatise of Government*. Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7370/7370-h/7370-h.htm>

⁵ Downs, A. (1957). An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy. *Journal of Political Economy*, 65(2), 135–150. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1827369>

However, the manner in which, or **how** the government communicates to its citizens varies between different governments. This variance is accounted for by their difference in ideology, i.e., political system. The two prominent systems observed in modern states are Totalitarianism and Democracy, each uniquely influencing communication within their respective societies⁶.

Totalitarian Systems

Totalitarian systems are characterized by their single party rule⁷ and aim to “subordinate aspects of individual life to the authority of the state”⁸. In this sense, they persuade citizens to believe their political agenda and demand unconditional support rather than adapting their policies to serve interest groups to garner support. Totalitarian systems accomplish this feat effectively, as noted by Orwell. Chomsky observes that “Orwell was impressed with the ability of totalitarian systems to instil beliefs that are firmly held and widely accepted although they are completely without foundation”⁹. But *how* do they communicate such beliefs so effectively?

Totalitarian systems are effective communicators of their political agenda by controlling *other givers* of evidence, which may include but are not limited to the press, political critics or opinionated writers and essayists. Thus, totalitarian systems create two impacts on evidence.

Firstly, totalitarian systems censor evidence contradictory to their political agenda. For example, numerous texts are outlawed in China, including *Zhuan Falun (1994)*, a central text of the highly politicized Falun Gong religion which protests the practices of the Chinese Communist Party¹⁰. In this case, the authors, acting as givers, are restricted from giving contradictory evidence, resulting in a heavy filtering of written-language communication.

⁶ Rao, G. V. (1974). Democracy versus Totalitarianism. *Social Scientist*, 3(2), 35–47.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3516250>

⁷ Cassinelli, C. (1962). The Totalitarian Party. *The Journal of Politics*, 24(1), 111.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2126740>

⁸ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2021). *totalitarianism*.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/totalitarianism>

⁹ Chomsky, (1986). Op. cit. p. 27.

¹⁰ Sanghvi, S. (2001). Crouching Tiger: Falun Gong Rising. *Harvard International Review*, 23(3), 7–9.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/42763707>

Secondly, totalitarian systems communicate incorrect or fabricated evidence to enhance their political agenda. Orwell is particularly critical of *doublespeak* within political language in totalitarian governments, demonstrating this in its extreme form in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), in which the slogans of the Party, ironically communicated through the Ministry of Truth, write “War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength”¹¹. In this case, givers abuse language by giving fabricated evidence to intentionally deceive receivers.

However, when totalitarian states are unable to effectively communicate through language their political agenda, they command obedience through force. Chomsky observes that the mechanisms of such states are “ultimately, some form of violence employed or threatened under highly visible centralised control”¹². Totalitarian states use violence to disincentivise receivers to question their given evidence.

Therefore, totalitarian systems filter out existing evidence contradictory to their agenda and use manipulative language and force to give fabricated evidence supporting their agenda. This creates an environment where receivers are spurred to receive the given evidence with ignorance as they are punished otherwise. Thus, Orwell’s problem is facilitated in totalitarian systems.

Democratic Systems

Modern democratic systems operate through representative government; public perspectives are represented through political parties¹³. A key factor of this process is the consent of citizens to be represented in such a way through politics. As Locke writes, “no one can be put out of this estate, and subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent”¹⁴. In contrast to totalitarian systems, force is not a viable method to induce conformity. Therefore, in theory, a democratic system allows givers to give evidence without being filtered or punished, and receivers can then choose to consent to receiving

¹¹ Orwell, G. (1949). *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. New York: Signet Classic, p. 4.

https://archive.org/details/1984novel00orwe_1/page/4/mode/2up

¹² Chomsky, (1986). Op. cit. p. 27.

¹³ Dahl, R. (2022). *England*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/democracy>

¹⁴ Locke, (1689). Op. cit.

such evidence. However, Chomsky observes that Orwell's problem nevertheless arises¹⁵, due to three main reasons.

Firstly, receivers may not consent to receiving evidence, and thus, even when given "so much evidence", may only know so little. This rejection of political evidence is coined as *political apathy*, and is argued by some to be acceptable, although deviant of the democratic ideal, and by others, to endanger the functioning of democracy¹⁶. As democratic systems operate on effective representation of public opinion, the prospect of limited or no public opinion undermines the function of democracy.

Secondly, there is the notion that consent, as described in democratic theory, does not exist practically in democratic society, resulting in the evidence given being corrupted. Chomsky and Herman, in *Manufacturing Consent*, introduces such a concept, arguing the concentrated ownership of news media has resulted in similar filtering mechanisms. The variance in profitability of different news has resulted in efforts to cover news more relevant to the status quo and dominant political agenda as they are more profitable¹⁷. This leads to a decrease in diversity of coverage, especially of opposing views. Therefore, receivers are unknowingly, and thus, non-consensually subjected to biased evidence, creating similar outcomes to totalitarian systems, although to a smaller extent.

Thirdly, the language, or tool used to communicate evidence can be ineffective, explaining why receivers know so little. In *Politics and the English Language (1946)*, Orwell reasons that writers misuse language, and thus give evidence which is a distortion of their original purpose. He argues that "the whole tendency of modern prose is away from concreteness", citing techniques such as euphemisms, dying metaphors and pretentious diction. He concludes that such techniques result in writers' unconscious of the meaning of their

¹⁵ Chomsky, (1986). Op. cit. p. 27.

¹⁶ Rosenberg, M. (1954). Some Determinants of Political Apathy. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 18(4), 349–366. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2745968>

¹⁷ Herman, S. & Chomsky, N. (2008). *Manufacturing Consent*. The Bodley Head, p. 1–138. https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/5537300/mod_resource/content/1/Noam%20Chomsky_%20Edward%20S.%20Herman%20-%20Manufacturing%20Consent_%20The%20Political%20Economy%20of%20the%20Mass%20Media-Bodley%20Head%20%282008%29.pdf.

writing¹⁸. Confucius similarly argues for the Rectification of Names “If language is not correct, then what is said is not meant”¹⁹, emphasising the importance of clarity and precision in language. Thus, correct language usage allows givers to better communicate evidence to receivers.

Therefore, social, institutional, and linguistic elements continue to distort political communication in democratic systems, and thus introduce bias in favour of different political agenda. Therefore, Orwell’s problem also exists in democratic systems.

Despite the difference in communication methods between totalitarian and democratic systems, a common effect arises in the citizens of both societies; they both generate a nationalistic identity²⁰ as they subscribe, with or without consent, to the political agenda of their governments. This has increased with technological advancement.

III. Technological advancements and Method of Communication

Technological advancements have increased the efficiency and convenience of communication. This has increased the givers’ ability to give evidence and has allowed more receivers to receive evidence. Social media platforms act as online spaces for givers and receivers to interact directly. Despite an increase in the number of receivers and volume of evidence received, this does not entail an increase in what receivers **know**. This paradoxical statement represents Orwell’s problem in the context of social media.

A main objective of social media platforms is to retain users, and thus platforms use complex algorithms which analyse users’ behaviour to maximise their time spent and enhance user experience. In particular, *filter bubbles*, as coined by Pariser, identify and

¹⁸ Orwell, G. (1946). *Politics and the English Language*. <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/politics-and-the-english-language/>

¹⁹ Steinkraus, W. E. (1980). Socrates, Confucius, and the Rectification of Names. *Philosophy East and West*, 30(2), 261–264. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1398850>

²⁰ *Nationalistic Identity*: identifying oneself with a single nation or other unit, placing it beyond good and evil and recognizing no other duty than that of advancing its interests.

Orwell, G. (1945). *Notes on Nationalism*. <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/notes-on-nationalism/>

increase content that piques higher user interest, and filter out content of lower interest²¹. Therefore, the evidence users receive is limited in breadth, and they are exposed to a small portion, or *echo chamber* of the total online space, thereby creating “the formation of groups of like-minded users framing and reinforcing a shared narrative”²². This creates *confirmation bias*, which contributes to the limiting of knowledge as users only interpret new evidence consistent with existing beliefs and receivers only encounter evidence from givers they find agreeable.

Translated into the political context, this is dangerous, as users only encounter others harbouring similar political views that reaffirm their perspectives and are not exposed to other views. In totalitarian systems, this increases political conformity; users exposed to political agendas on social media are likely to be more convinced if they witness supporting views. This achieves similar effects in democratic systems, but encourages political extremism, as users subscribing to different agendas conform further to their beliefs in the absence of contradictory beliefs. The validation of political views therefore further advances nationalist sentiments²³ in totalitarian and democratic systems alike. Thus, smaller breadth of evidence is given to receivers, resulting in them knowing, and desiring to know, less.

Furthermore, social media has also increased the number of givers; givers of evidence have been decentralised for the average social media user, contrary to traditional news media. This can be beneficial as it offers a platform for suppressed groups and individuals. However, it is a detriment to the quality of evidence as such a platform also accommodates the spread of misinformation. Additionally, perhaps more concerningly, the algorithm which responds to user behaviour, favours short, catchy messages with easily identifiable buzzwords. Therefore, the emphasis is no longer placed on the purpose of the message, but the words within the message themselves. Orwell observes this phenomenon within a

²¹ Pariser, E. (2011). *The Filter Bubble*. Penguin Group, p. 8.
https://www.google.com.au/books/edition/The_Filter_Bubble/-FWOOpw3nYC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=The+Filter+Bubble:+What+The+Internet+Is+Hiding+From+You&printsec=frontcover

²² Cinelli, M. & Morales, G. & Galeazzi, A. & Quattrociocchi, W. & Starnini, M. (2021). The echo chamber effect on social media. *PNAS* 118(9). <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2023301118>

²³ Orwell, (1945). Op. cit.

different context, writing “when we call a country democratic we are praising it”²⁴. This analogy, demonstrating the links between certain words to preconceived connotations, albeit deserved or not, applies to social media. Users frequently define words by connotation and simplify political messages to simple buzzwords, thus distorting their meaning rather than judging by objective definition. Therefore, the givers, receivers and type of language used in social media have led to a decreased quality of evidence, resulting in receivers knowing so little.

Therefore, social media has revolutionised the method of communication, which as a result, has shifted the content of what is communicated. It impacts not only how givers and receivers communicate evidence, but also the evidence itself. Therefore, Orwell’s problem exists, and is exacerbated by social media.

IV. Conclusion

Varying political systems and communication technologies have changed both the scope and method of communication. However, in different political and technological contexts where language has clearly evolved, Orwell’s problem persists. It can only be solved by effective communication; the givers must communicate quality evidence clearly to the receivers, who must in turn interpret it critically.

²⁴ Orwell, (1946). Op. cit.