

NEWSPEAK - is not all that new!



A couple of years ago, I went along to see Headlong's¹ stage adaptation of George Orwell's masterpiece 'Nineteen Eighty-Four' (at the Melbourne Festival); which started me thinking..... The way words shape people's thinking can be very powerful. This power can be used for both good and bad and is an important element in effective communication.

Oratory and rhetoric are generally seen as positive motivational and persuasive skills; propaganda as the 'flip side' focused on misleading and creating 'false truths'. The question is, can project professionals learn to use these skills to enhance their stakeholder engagement activities; and is this ethical? My feeling is that the ability to persuade stakeholders to help you be successful is a positive skill and is ethical provided the skill is used for the greater good. Therefore, we can learn from the black arts of propaganda showcased in 1984 and turn them into assets to enhance our communication and stakeholder engagement activities; but only as long as the 'dark side' of this powerful capability is understood and avoided as well.

Orwell is famous for two novels, *Animal Farm* published in 1945 and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* published in 1949. Both were focused on the evil of totalitarian regimes, but 1984 goes beyond politics to look at the process of manipulating the way people think, or more precisely, how to use language to stop people thinking. Paradoxically, *The Principles of Newspeak* are defined in an appendix to 1984 (and therefore few people read it), but reading the appendix reframes the whole book².

¹ <https://headlong.co.uk/>

² For "*The Principles of Newspeak*" An appendix to 1984 see: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newspeak>

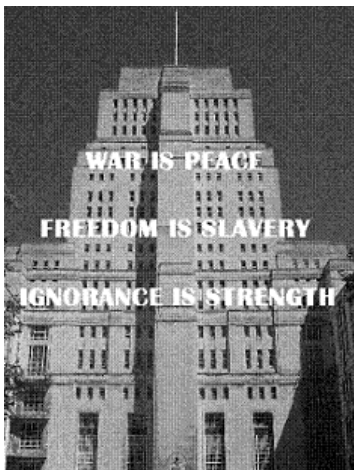
The importance of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a classic 20th century novel can be measured by the number of its terms and concepts that are still part of our language today such as *Big Brother*, *doublethink*, *thoughtcrime* and *thoughtpolice*; as well as the adjective *Orwellian*, which describes official deception and manipulation by the state.

What I find fascinating for a novel published in 1949, is the parallels between Newspeak and modern adaptations of language, particularly SMS, and the intentions of Newspeak to control thinking, a concept that has recently come to the fore in range of studies - language really does change what you see and how you think³.

From the appendix:

The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought - that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc - should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words.*

* *Ingsoc: The philosophy of The Party, run by Big Brother.*



Newspeak was constructed using two fundamental processes:

1. Remove as many words as possible from the language: This reduction of vocabulary was regarded as an end in itself; Newspeak was designed to diminish the range of thought, and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum.
2. Abbreviate and amalgamate words to create a simple construct with a precise (usually perverse) meaning: MINILUV (Ministry of Love) was the department focused on maintaining state control over everyone through surveillance by the *Thoughtpolice*, torture and state killings. MINITRUE was responsible for propaganda and the manipulation of historical records to meet current needs.

Fast forward to the 21st century and look at the words in any typical SMS!

TMI - KHUF! (translation: Too much information - Know how you feel).

The question posed by 1984 in the modern paradigm is does this reduction in language seen in many emails, SMS messages and the jargon of technical writing contribute to quicker communication to more people or take us down the road of Newspeak and prevent constructive thinking outside of the narrowly defined language?

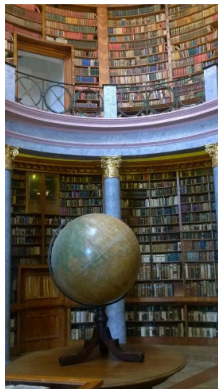
One of the big differences is that Newspeak was designed to eliminate creative thought, the language of SMS and other technical disciplines is organic and owned by its users; but is this difference enough to prevent the elimination of creative thought and innovation by restricting the language - particularly to stakeholders outside of the 'in-group'?

³ For more on *language shaping what we see*, see: https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/PDF_Papers/P186-Understanding_Design.pdf and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/tv/entries/24bbc4b8-58f9-373d-a896-274ae453ef2a>

Conversely, one of the ideas in Newspeak that may be adapted to a positive use is the way entities are named, what if we changed the name of PMOs to SPEs - **Successful Project Enablers**? If the SPE staff actually lived up to the name and helped projects under their control to be successful wouldn't that be good? Change the name of the ubiquitous 'monthly report for July' to a 'report on achievements in July'; does this move the document from boring to interesting??

We know that what things are called affects people's expectations, a fact not lost on *Big Brother*, but the concept can be equally useful if used positively to encourage success..... or is this too much spin?

First Published 6 March 2016 – **Augmented and Updated**



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