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Parallels between Twitter and Orwell's Newspeak

It can be argued that Twitter has emerged as a legitimate form of communication that could influence how children will spell — and think — in the future. Both Fox News and CNN have adopted the form and syntax of Twitter for their closed captions, so that Twitter is no longer merely a computer shorthand but has become an integral facet of our mainstream media.

To illustrate: On Sept. 11, 2001, Fox News carried a story about President Bush's immediate response to the terrorists' attacks that adopted Twitter as the style for their closed-caption account (he "did rht thin").

This year, a new keyboard was introduced called "Tweetboard." The traditional keyboard has been reconfigured, so that Twitter symbols assume prominent positions on the top row: @ (reply), # (hashtags), RT (retweet), and via @. Another key is for shortening URLs.

One way to understand the impact of Twitter is to consider another language that is predicated on the elimination and abbreviation of words — the language of Newspeak, found in George Orwell's futuristic novel, *1984*. In the Appendix of *1984*, Orwell observes that "Newspeak differed from most all other languages, in that its vocabulary grew smaller instead of larger every year."

Reduction of vocabulary was regarded as an end in itself, and no word that could be dispensed with was allowed to survive. Newspeak was designed not to extend but to diminish the range of thought, and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum . . . The Newspeak vocabulary was tiny, and new ways of reducing it were constantly being devised.

Like Newspeak, the syntax of Twitter is based on economy. Only 140 characters are allowed in a single tweet. Thus, in an online article, entitled "7 Tips to Improve Your Twitter Tweets," the first tip involves ways to cut the copy: Abbreviate. If you can say it with less letters, do so! . . . There are only 140 characters allowed in a single tweet, so shortening a word or using a bit of slang is completely acceptable. Instead of "are," say "r." the same goes for "you" and "u."

Orwell's comments about the impact of Newspeak on thought may also be applicable to Twitter, in the following respects:

■ Ideas are reduced to literal meaning.

In these reductive languages, the meaning of words is reduced to a literal level; there is no space to examine the implications of meaning. Orwell explains: "The A vocabulary consisted of the words needed for the business of everyday life — for such things as eating, drinking, working, putting on one's clothes. . . . Their meanings were far more rigidly defined. All ambiguities and shades of meaning had been purged out of them."

To illustrate: Danny Ayalon, the Assistant Foreign Minister of Israel, issues daily Tweets to the public. The problem, of course, is reducing the complexity of a 2,500-year religious, cultural, and political conflict to 140 characters. On September 9, Ayalon tweeted, "Dilemma is placed on international community by Iran. Need to turn the tables and place dilemma back on Iran. Only with strong sanctions."

This missive provides only surface information, leaving numerous questions unaddressed. What is the “dilemma”? Why has this dilemma been placed on the international community by Iran? What is meant by “strong sanctions”? How do strong sanctions “place the dilemma” back on Iran? What other options (in addition to sanctions) exist, and what are their relative strengths and weaknesses?

■ **No context to information is provided.**

Both Twitter and Newspeak operate in an eternal present; there is no room to discuss ideas within a historical or cultural context. Orwell declares, “When Oldspeak had been once and for all superseded, the last link with the past would have been severed.” Thus, Ayalon’s tweet leaves unanswered essential background information, such as: When was this “dilemma” placed on the international community by Iran? Have sanctions been tried before? When, and with what results? What was the role of other countries in this activity — Israel, United States and Western Allies, other Arab nations.

■ **Language assumes a neutral tenor.**

The use of abbreviations eliminates the emotional connotation of content. Orwell explains: “Even in the early decades of the twentieth century, . . . the tendency to use abbreviations was most marked in totalitarian countries and totalitarian organizations. Examples were such words as Nazi, Gestapo, Comintern, Inprecorr, Agitprop. In the beginning the practice had been adopted as it were instinctively, but in Newspeak it was used with a conscious purpose. It was perceived that in thus abbreviating a name one narrowed and subtly altered its meaning, by cutting out most of the associations that would otherwise cling to it.”

One major difference between Newspeak and Twitter, of course, involves function. Newspeak’s purpose was ideological; the government of Big Brother instituted this language as a way of controlling the masses. In contrast, the form and format of Twitter is technologically driven; Twitter has been designed to reach targeted groups of people throughout the virtual world instantaneously. But regardless of intention, Twitter is anti-democratic. It helps create a young generation that not only cannot spell but is also incapable of examining the implications of ideas, challenging information, and thinking independently. ■

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