**If print dies so does freedom**

**Whilst we embrace the multimedia excitement of online digital media that replaces print editions with 24-hour publication by the second and in all dimensions, we may also have sleep-walked into Orwell’s dystopian *Nineteen Eighty Four* world of memory holes and totalitarian surveillance says Tim Crook**

**Eating the news**

You can eat a newspaper, but not an online publication. Why does this seemingly useless piece of information have any significance? The answer is very simple. The tangible printed form is a real object that can be concealed. The digital form has no connection with the existential human body apart from the fading memory of something having been seen.

Put another way something censored in written printed form can always be found. Its equivalent digital jumble of 01 coding once deleted leaves no visible and attainable trace record. Print is permanent. To remove it requires burning or some other method of destruction. Digital online communication disappears when the electricity is turned off, or the broadband cable of data cut.

**The Catastrophe**

Many people of my generation are increasingly distressed about the exponential implosion of newspaper circulation, loss of journalism employment and the abject failure to replace this loss with proportionate increases in journalists working online with a sustainable economic model.

My local shop and newsagent proprietor before retiring last year explained why the newspaper and magazine stand had been reduced by three quarters with an expanded display of vodka and other hard liquor. Paper sales had not just been decimated, but reduced by nine tenths in ten years. There was a similar reduction, inevitably, in the number of paper boys and girls. Several villages no longer had any paper delivery.

Of course, it was possible to cite examples of the trend being bucked and news media publishers successfully combining a digital and print relationship. *Private Eye* continues to significantly eschew the digital dimension, the Tindle newspaper group continues to buy up failing newspaper titles, open new ones, survive and make a profit. The *Economist* and the *Times/Sunday Times*, and *Spectator* sustain a digital and print partnership which is profit-led and expansionist. But the fact remains the vital social habit of buying and reading a newspaper is in catastrophic decline and I personally cannot resist. I have tried subscribing to The Times for a year or two, but found redeeming the vouchers for the papers could not be maintained as a daily habit. I piled up my copies of the papers and magazines in the university newsroom, but the students were rarely moved to pick up and read them.

I tried to be seen to be at least the only lecturer prepared to visibly carry around a newspaper in a department with multiple journalism undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in the hope I became a role model, encouraging my colleagues and the younger generation to retrieve the habit. I even invaded the corrupt and perverted space of online conversation to evangelise the beauty of print and mock the superficiality and superfluous vapidity of the digital cyber usurper. (Crook nd 2013)

I have pointedly bought copies of the printed edition of *Le Figaro*, and *Country Life*, two beautifully designed and produced newspaper and magazine forms in the hope I could be re-charged with the loyalty and need to be a committed and consistent consumer in the future.

**Book v Newspaper**

This has been to no avail. Whereas I will always prefer to buy and read a book over its Kindle, digital downloaded version, and my expenditure on the book form remains dangerously high and reckless, the book folders on my smart-phone and tablet have been neglected for two years. Several hundred downloads never swiped open.

There is a cultural value and significance to the book which has not transferred to the newspaper, or magazine. The former has constitutional literacy; the latter is a throwaway redundancy. I will gladly spend £30 to £40 on AbeBooks, or Ebay to acquire a first edition of George Orwell’s Left Book Club edition of *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1936), despite having several paperback versions published more than 70 years’ later, but nothing can persuade me to spend the same amount of money on a subscription to *New Statesman* or *The London Review of Books*.

**Demonstrating the problem in Academia**

There are journalism programmes in universities now which do not teach print design and publication. The great Harold Evans’ five volume manual on editing, design, typography and layout from 1972 is an historical anachronism. We might as well be reading about calligraphy and illumination from the Middle Ages.

This state of affairs makes me feel like a falling man of history, unable to do anything to resist an unendurable destiny of social disempowerment and political vulnerability. I have had nightmares about desperately trying to locate articles and features I had been so sure about, but no longer exist in virtual space and for which there is no longer any refuge or recourse in public libraries, which used to have the architecture of huge chapels lined with hundreds of thousands of books on shelves floor to ceiling.

I have punished myself with the indictment of hypocrisy when distributing pamphlet sheets containing ten statements and facts banned and censored in the UK over the last 50 years to 150 students in a lecture theatre. I then projected the same text onto the huge presentation screen from an externally published website.

I then asked ten of the students to do their best to destroy their sheets of paper and compared this inconvenience and difficulty with the speed and effortless deletion operation in the online software embedded on the lecture hall computer. Two clicks, one username and password, and whoosh. In a split second the ten resonant maxims were gone as though they were never here nor there.

Meanwhile the students were still tearing into the paper, scrunching it up into a ball, some were wondering what would have happened if they ate the paper; others whether the smoke alarm and sprinklers would have been activated by a little conflagration.

I then asked the remaining 140 students to imagine there had been an executive government order backed by judicial injunction ordering them to surrender their sheets/pamphlets, and making it a criminal offence to possess or distribute them. What would they have done with their manifesto of subversion, resistance and liberty? If they wanted to keep it, how would they hide and conceal?

Most realised the state was faced with complex and myriad difficulties in search and retrieval. How could it be so sure all of the students would give up their hot property? How could it be so sure of identifying and confirming who had received the paper? Was there a reliable data trail in credit and swipe card transactions? If free how could it have been receipted? The paper so offensive to state authoritarian approbation became a fugitive and victim of oppression, but it was easy to protect and harbour. It had no digital signature.

Once it had escaped from the originating printing source it would be well-nigh impossible to track and destroy. When the 140 students with their own individual copies of the pamphlet dispersed into their own complex social and physical human networks the challenge facing the authoritarian tendency was the same as trying to contain a virulent and contagious disease. I am sure the United Nations had wished Ebola had been an internet virus.

It quickly dawned on the students the digital version erased before their eyes, had, while available online, been connected with every downloader. The originator’s dangerous creation while ostensibly wiped was always stored somewhere on the computer’s hard disc, and had been mirrored by some digital back-up facility.

Even somebody seeking to evade GCHQ and NSA style surveillance by encrypting and sheltering behind onion style proxy servers, was still traceable through surveillance, intervention and infiltration.

**Orwell’s memory holes**

George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* fully predicted and realised the dangers of combining totalitarian control with manipulative technology in social communication. He conjured the implication of the memory hole down which truth and the public record can be annihilated in a blast furnace or bonfire of human identity and history. What was being destroyed was also cultural dignity and independence.

This last was for the disposal of waste paper. Similar slits existed in thousands or tens of thousands throughout the building, not only in every room but at short intervals in every corridor. For some reason they were nicknamed memory holes. When one knew that any document was due for destruction, or even when one saw a scrap of waste paper lying about, it was an automatic action to lift the flap of the nearest memory hole and drop it in, whereupon it would be whirled away on a current of warm air to the enormous furnaces which were hidden somewhere in the recesses of the building.

(Orwell 1975:33-4)

When communication and information is centralised by technology onto one electronic platform Orwell’s vision of control is realised. This is what the internet has achieved. It means Winston Smith’s dystopian world of destroying the past is materialising into reality:

This process of continuous alteration was applied not only to newspapers, but to books, periodicals, pamphlets, posters, leaflets, films, sound-tracks, cartoons, photographs – to every kind of literature or documentation which might conceivably hold any political or ideological significance. Day by day and almost minute by minute the past was brought up to date.

(Ibid 35)

**Loss of family identity**

The material newspaper form of local public record was essential in constructing my own family identity. My mother died having erased anything connecting her with her parents. A breakdown in the relationship with her father meant he had never seen either of his grandsons. It was several days concentrating on the brown newsprint of the *Wigan Observer* which enabled me to discover a report of my grandmother’s funeral, the mourners and family friends attending, and the valedictory meeting of Up Holland Urban District Council, where my grandfather celebrated the end of a 40-year career in local government and the esteem in which he was held by the local community.

This record of the 1950s does not exist in the early 21st century. The local newspaper industry has neither the manpower nor media institutions on the ground to achieve such micro-reporting and writing of the first draft of history. The online equivalents are unlikely to archive in the same way. And business failure and digital indebtedness to hosting servers could so easily result in the wiping of whole swathes of online journalism. This is condemning future generations to a rootlessness of origin and historical reference. Without family history in the social context you will be without family identity.

**The secret deletions**

I have no doubt the Orwellian liquidation and alteration of information is carrying on without challenge or social and political discomfiture. The European Court of Justice ruling in 2014 on the right to be forgotten through Google browser data processing means hundreds of thousands of articles and online records are being disconnected to the searching process. This, in the old days, would have been the equivalent of a reference library without any catalogue or index. Courts in England and Wales regularly issue secret injunctions suppressing links to archives, and directly removing entire postings.

I have seen the Metropolitan Police change the detail of an important online media release which had huge significance in determining the public interest debate at the centre of the story. This was the case of the three Bethnal Green Academy schoolgirls who had travelled to join ISIS in Syria. What was in the letter given to the girls by the deputy head teacher to be passed onto their parents after it was suspected that their friend had gone to Syria a few months earlier? Did the letter say their friend was missing, or specifically state they believed she was with ISIS in Syria? Did the girls hide the letter from their parents? As an online editor I blinked with disorientation and confusion as a key line in the police bulletin was now different. Had I read the original release wrongly? Fortunately, I could rely on the Press Association to explain that the Met Police had indicated initially that the deputy head teacher had said the schoolgirls’ friend was believed to be in Syria. Then they had clarified this was not the case. She had only been described as missing. In the online digital age, without verifying correlatives, and the permanence of a printed artefact, everything becomes malleable, illusory, ephemeral and without boundaries. It is as though the human body loses its skeleton, skyscraper concrete its steel mesh, the uniform and suit their essential stitching.

**Conclusion**

I feel responsible for having let down the current younger generations who look at newspaper buying and reading as something quaint and bad for health – a bit like smoking a pipe or wearing a bowler hat to work. Flapping the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper over grilled kippers at breakfast was something my father did and I imagine I should be doing now. This is nostalgic fantasy. I often forget he was born in 1915 and died in 1986, and I am now 57. We have plunged helter-skelter into blindly and thoughtlessly abandoning the art of quotidian reading by newspaper. The aspirant authoritarian and totalitarian can certainly wise up to the prospects for control, manipulation and disrupting the art of verification. This will always be something that can be avoided so much more reliably by exploring volumes of newspapers rather than forlornly search-engine surfing with the prevailing moniker: ‘Some results may have been removed under data protection law in Europe.’

This is something I experienced when writing the name of a famous and global celebrity in the Google search-box. There were 39,200,000 results in .66 of a second. Speed and scale were astonishingly impressive. But I could not help worrying about those results which ‘may have been removed’ secretly. Print may be dying, but democracy and liberty may be also passing away with it.

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