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AP English Language

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Big Brother Today

In the United States, political power is expected by many people who participate in the political process to remain accountable to them. The most direct violation of this check on state power is when the state oppresses people, citizens or non-citizens, with impunity. George Orwell's vision in *1984* was that oppression would be highly visible and obviously coercive. When people in the year of the book's namesake rejoiced at avoiding Orwell's prophecy, it would be naïve to suppose that they had rejoiced over oppression-less conditions. The oppression became more insidious, as Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World* predicted. The pain of oppression continues, and even as power structures encourage feelings of pleasure, the long-term balance of utility is such that more pain than pleasure results from a failure to think critically. Even oppression which would totally fulfill Orwell's vision has become insidious; the oppression has become an invisible afterthought for many. Orwell's vision is partly correct in terms of how the US treats non-citizen terror suspects at Guantanamo Bay, but the secretive nature of this oppression renders Huxley's position more plausible. Huxley's position is also highly plausible in the context of the US stock market.

Indefinite detention at Guantanamo Bay is the clearest example of Big Brother-style oppression that is little discussed within today's "trivial culture," to use the phrase of Neil Postman in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, a comparison of Huxley and Orwell's positions (Postman n.d.). Non-citizen terrorism suspects are jailed without fair

trials and tortured for information supposedly relevant to national security. The actual relevance of this information to national security is in doubt, making the justification for inflicting pain on those who would not otherwise deserve it tenuous at best. Even if we completely granted the relevance of the information to national security, it would be particularly difficult to justify the use of force-feeding at Guantanamo to coerce hunger strikers. Feeding tubes are shoved into the nostrils of terror suspects, resulting in numerous health complications (Hayoun 2014). This oppression is most certainly insidious in that the reality of force-feeding at Guantanamo Bay is probably unheard of by many Americans. Most Americans have become too distracted to notice; Huxley noted in *Brave New World Revisited* that those who seek to challenge tyranny “failed to take into account man’s almost infinite appetite for distractions” (Huxley 1958). This means that Orwell is correct in part; 1984 argued that people would be controlled by inflicting pain (Postman n.d.), but the US government has visibly become Big Brother for non-citizens, not society as a whole, which Orwell most likely did not predict.

Huxley, unlike Orwell, believed that “no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy...people will come...to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think” (Postman n.d.). These technologies already exist in the modern day, in particular, vastly long fiber optic cables which facilitate high-frequency stock market trading. High-frequency traders have arisen in numerous stock exchanges to gain an advantage in the market whereas they can buy shares at the speed of milliseconds, faster than you can blink your eyes (Lewis 2014, pgs 9 and 10). Brad Katsuyama, when he was a trader in New York for the Royal Bank of Canada, noticed how the shares he placed bids on would vanish immediately after he hit “Enter” on his keyboard (The Australian 2014). This baffled him to such an extent that he investigated this problem on his own.

He searched out tech support people, product developers, and others who were supposed to know how the technology worked, and not even they had any idea (Lewis 2014, pgs 32 and 33), proving Huxley's prediction that "technologies would undo their capacity to think." Eventually he quit his job, and created a new market last year with a team of programmers called IEX (The Australian 2014). The purpose of IEX was to take down high-frequency traders by putting a delay of 350 milliseconds on each trade (The Australian 2014). Developments like IEX are a reaction to a phenomenon which was ultimately screwing over consumers represented by people like Brad Katsuyama when he traded for the Royal Bank of Canada. Certain traders had an extremely unfair advantage over the others, and the utter secrecy of HFT renders markets so complex that the technology involved indeed renders the system virtually impossible to comprehend.

The fact that Orwell's dystopian predictions came true uniquely for non-citizens raises an important ethical question; do our moral obligations stop at the border line? It is intuitive that the US government is morally responsible to do something about the suffering that it is inflicting on people of foreign countries even if those people do not contribute to the tax rolls or the domestic economy. As such, Orwell's prediction was not correct overall, but *1984* should nonetheless inspire us to stand up against the status quo at Guantanamo Bay. *Brave New World* should also lead us to rethink our understanding of technology. Traders that rely on standard methods for communicating data should not end up exploited by high frequency traders who have gained an artificial advantage because of greed for speed.

