

Little Brother Is Watching

By WALTER KIRN

In **George Orwell's** "1984," that novel of totalitarian politics whose great mistake was to emphasize the villainy of society's masters while playing down the mischief of the masses, the goal of communications technology was brutal and direct: to ensure the dominance of the state. The sinister "telescreens" placed in people's homes spewed propaganda and conducted surveillance, keeping the population passive and the leadership firmly in control. In the face of constant monitoring, all people could do was sterilize their behavior, conceal their thoughts and carry on like model citizens.

This was, it turns out, a quaint scenario, grossly simplistic and deeply melodramatic. As the Internet proves every day, it isn't some stern and monolithic Big Brother that we have to reckon with as we go about our daily lives, it's a vast cohort of prankish Little Brothers equipped with devices that Orwell, writing 60 years ago, never dreamed of and who are loyal to no organized authority. The invasion of privacy — of others' privacy but also our own, as we turn our lenses on ourselves in the quest for attention by any means — has been democratized.

For **Tyler Clementi**, the **Rutgers University** student who recently committed suicide after a live-stream video of an intimate encounter of his was played on the Web, Little Brother took the form of a prying roommate with a webcam. The snoop had no discernible agenda other than silly, juvenile troublemaking, which made his actions more disturbing in certain ways than the oppressive prying of a dictatorship. The roommate, it seems, was acting on impulse, at least initially, and his transgression couldn't be anticipated, let alone defended against. Clementi, unlike Orwell's Winston Smith, who hid from the telescreens whenever possible and understood that the price of personhood was ceaseless self-censorship and vigilance, had no way of knowing that the walls had eyes. Nor did his unseen observer anticipate the ultimate consequences of his intrusion.

In "1984," the abolition of personal space was part of an overarching government policy, but nowadays it's often nothing more than a side effect of wired high spirits. The era of the "viral video," when footage of some absorbing slice of life can spread overnight around the globe, is bringing out the anarchist in all of us. Sometimes the results are welcome, benign, and the intruder does his subject a favor. Take the young man who taped his girlfriend shimmying in front of a TV attached to a Wii Fit video game. He shot the clip without her knowledge, apparently, and in no time **Google** and YouTube made her famous. She capitalized on her high profile by appearing on "The Tyra Banks Show."

There are also times, of course, when Little Brother does a positive service to society by turning the tables on the state and watching the watchers. The other day a video emerged that seemed to show an Israeli soldier dancing in a mocking manner around a cowering Palestinian woman whom he appeared to have under his control. The viewer couldn't help but be reminded of more shocking pictures from Abu Ghraib — scenes of torture that might never have come to light if Little Brother

hadn't been standing nearby. The irony is that these images, which caused a convulsion of national moral conscience, were taken — in some cases, at least — as photographic boasts or trophies. So giddy with power and numb to its abuses were the camera-wielding prison guards that they indicted themselves with their own antics.

In the postideological YouTube-topia that Orwell couldn't have foreseen, information flows in all directions and does as it pleases, for better or for worse, serving no masters and obeying no party line. The telescreens, tiny, mobile and ubiquitous, at times seem to be working independently, for some mysterious purpose all their own. This morning, when I sat down to write, I was distracted by a story on my computer about a Google Street View camera that snapped pictures of a corpse lying on a bloody street in urban Brazil. I clicked on the link, unable to do otherwise, and up came the awful, disconcerting image. For a moment, I felt like a voyeur, spiritually dirtied by what I saw. A moment later I was checking the weather report and the status of my I.R.A.

Even Big Brother himself was not so cold. He, at least, had a motive for his peeping — to maintain order, to shore up his position and to put down possible rebellions — but I and the countless Little Brothers like me lack any clear notion of what we're after. A fleeting sensation of omnipotence? The gratification of idle curiosity? Our nonstop trafficking in stolen images, sometimes as consumers and sometimes as producers (is there any meaningful difference anymore?), adds up to a story without a plot. Is it a tragic story? On occasion. It was tragic for Tyler Clementi and for his roommate, who ruined his own life by spying on another's, but for those who are suddenly lofted to fame and riches by achieving viral visibility, it's closer to a feel-good comedy.

Ours is a fragmentarian society, infinitely divided against itself and endlessly disrupted from within by much the same technologies that, in Orwell's somber novel, assured a dull and deadening stability. In some ways, his nightmare vision of state control is cozy and reassuring by comparison. Big Brother may have stifled dissent by forcing conformity on his frightened subjects, but his trespasses were predictable and manageable. What's more, his assaults on citizens' privacy left the concept of privacy intact, allowing the possibility that with his overthrow people might live again as they once had.

Little Brother affords us no such luck, in part because he dwells inside us rather than in some remote and walled-off headquarters. In the new, chaotic regime of networked lenses and microphones that point every which way and rest in every hand, permitting us to train them on ourselves as easily as we aim them at one another, the private and public realms are so confused that it's best to treat them as identical. With nowhere to hide, you might as well perform, dispensing with old-fashioned notions of discretion and personal dignity. If Tyler Clementi had remembered to do this — to yield his personal life to the machine and acknowledge, with Shakespeare, that the world's a soundstage — he might have shrugged off the embarrassment he suffered and made a reality show of his existence. He might have asked Little Brother into his room instead of choosing, fatally, to keep him out in the only manner he must have thought possible.