Pieces from classic sci-fi dystopias are falling into place

On June 5, the literary world lost a true legend with the passing of Ray Bradbury. His death – along with some recent events here in local news – got me thinking back to my teenage years where his masterpiece Fahrenheit 451 was required reading at my high school along with George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four (and I'd be remiss if I didn't italicize titles of literary works when thinking about my high school English-Lit teacher). Back then, the goal of the school administrators, it seemed, was to caution how easily society could fall into a wretched, dreadful state along with a heavy assist from modern technology. The word for such a work of fiction is dystopian.

I re-read Fahrenheit 451 upon hearing the news about Bradbury's death and realized that, at least from a technological and communications standpoint, much of what was imagined in that novel exists in some form today. One of the major themes of the novel is the role new media played in detaching people from reading literature, to the point that "firemen" became "custodians of our peace of mind." Protagonist Guy Montag's wife Mildred immersed herself with a "parlor family" whose lives played out on parlor walls – full screens covering three walls (Guy had a cash flow problem – hence no fourth wall screen). Today, a quick look at BestBuy.com reveals a 92-inch-class widescreen perfect for watching reality TV programming.
In Faherenheit 451, technology and new media hastened life's pace and partial information without context passed for knowledge. People communicated using walkie-talkie-like "ear thimbles", which I presume would bear a strong resemblance to the Bluetooth headsets of today. Thanks to technology, Fire Captain Beatty explained, "English and spelling were gradually neglected." Twitter, anyone? Finally, biometric technology was already essential for security apps in the novel, which was first published in 1953.

In Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four, technology enabled "The Party" to keep the citizens under omnipresent surveillance. Hidden microphones and "telescreens" were everywhere, and were mandatory even in the home. Telescreens not only

monitored the people, but fed propaganda at all times.

The technology of today is beginning to rival that of Oceania in Nineteen Eighty-Four. In New York City, the mayor wants speed cameras on city streets, and the police department and Microsoft are implementing an elaborate “Domain Awareness” system. And just how small are our microphones getting?

There’s a saying that Nineteen Eighty-Four wasn’t meant to be an instruction manual, but society is embracing the benefits of technology while failing to heed the warnings of Orwell and Bradbury. Too often, when surveillance systems are debated, the “if you don’t do anything wrong, you have nothing to be afraid of” maxim comes up. We even give Orwell a nod and a wink when we name our reality shows (i.e. “Big Brother”).

Since I’m pretty far removed from high school, I’m wondering if there’s a new Bradbury or Orwell out there whose works are being assigned in schools to warn of what’s could also come if we’re not careful. Someone whose message may actually resonate with this generation as opposed to mine, which seems to react to the real potential for technology misuse with countenance and approval.

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