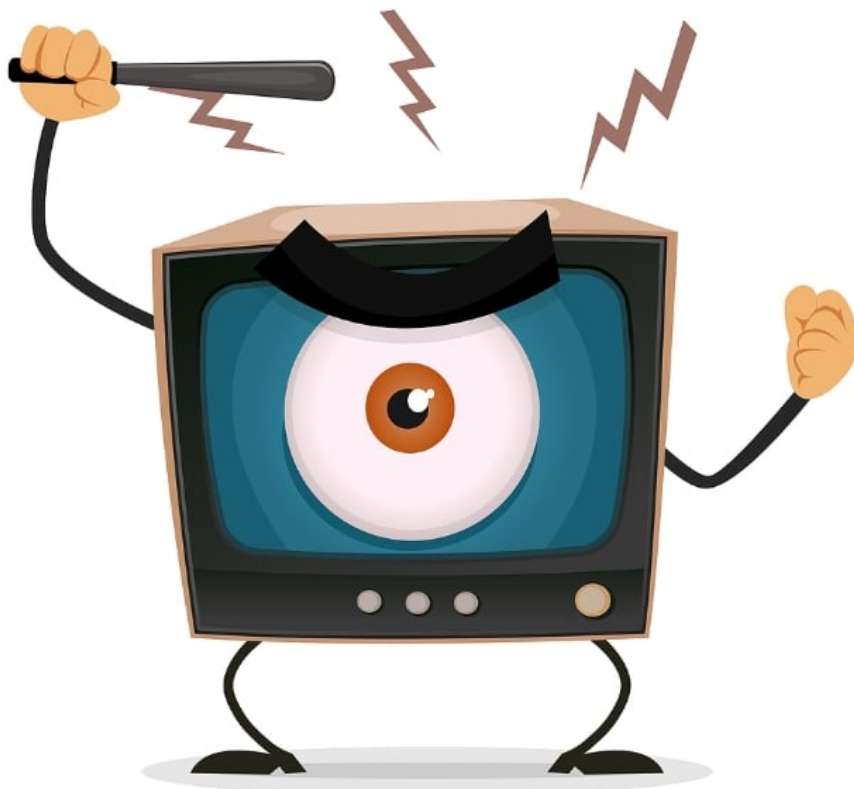


The Age of Electronic Totalitarianism

By Theodore Dalrymple

In the old days (whenever they were), people in Britain who were arrested by the police and questioned were told that they did not have to say anything, but anything that they did say might be taken down and used in evidence against them. This was all perfectly clear, and the wise criminal kept his mouth shut.



Things were made a little more complicated when the government, in its long-standing effort to pretend that it was doing something to protect the public from high levels of crime without actually doing anything, changed the wording of what the police said to arrested persons so as to

warn them that if they failed to say something to the police that they subsequently used in court in their defense, the court might draw an inference from their initial silence. I rarely met an arrested person who understood the new wording, except that in general it was a threat; but despite the fact that in theory the change represented a dilution of the protections of an accused person, in practice it made no difference, because courts never in fact drew any inferences

from an accused person's silence to the police. Thus the change in wording was completely in line with the fundamental principle of British government: to do something and nothing at the same time by precisely the same means.

What surprised me in the days when I would be a witness in murder trials was the proportion of our daily life that now takes place on camera. Rarely was the murder itself filmed, but much that led up to it and much that was subsequent to it was. In those days, the quality of the recording was often such that the identity of those filmed was rarely clear, and there were specialists in facial recognition. Now, of course, this specialism no longer exists.

I was slightly alarmed that so much of life in public was recorded on video: that when you walked down the street or crossed the road, or bought something in a store, you were being filmed without your knowledge. It was not that I was doing anything wrong or wanted to do something wrong in the future; it was just that feeling that Big Brother was watching you, which is anxiety-provoking in itself, especially for those who have nothing much to be anxious about. We live in a peculiar atmosphere of surveillance and impunity.

Things have gone much further since then in the destruction of the possibilities of privacy, of behavior that can be unselfconscious because it is fleeting and unrecorded. Even worse is the fact that one can now be recorded saying or doing what one has never said or done. Given the current propensity of electronic mobs to destroy the reputations of selected victims, the ability to make anyone say anything, or seem to say anything, is a recipe for a truly Hobbesian world.

We should never forget the joys of denunciation. I was reading a book the other day by the Franco-Bulgarian writer Tzvetan Todorov, who pointed out that one of the consolations of living in a totalitarian society is that a means of destroying your enemies, or merely people you don't like, is permanently

available to you by means of anonymous denunciation: Though, of course, you can be destroyed by the same means. In this way, social trust is completely destroyed and everyone walks permanently on eggshells.

It seems to me that we are fast approaching a similar situation, and only people with the rhinoceros hide of the psychopath or those whose career is over can entirely escape the anxiety of electronic denunciation. Artificial intelligence has already reached the stage at which "intelligent" spectacles can, by facial recognition, identify almost anyone and supply the person who wears them with information about that person. Anonymity is becoming impossible, and with it sincerity or freedom of expression. Ours is an age, or threatens to become an age, of electronic totalitarianism, without there needing to be a dictator. Everyone will be a potential Stalin and a potential victim of a Stalin, or a thousand Stalins, at the same time.

I am glad to say that I do not feel much affected by these developments because my life and career are almost over. But when I look at the commentary on the internet by the general public that follows the articles written by those with whom they disagree, I tremble (metaphorically, I hasten to add) for the future. Personal details of anyone who ventures an opinion will be immediately available to thousands or millions, and in every crowd of a thousand enraged persons there is one who is willing to move on to practical action, such as murder. This can hardly be propitious for freedom of opinion or expression. In timidity will be the only safety.

The extreme bad temper to be found on the wrongly named social media and on the internet raises an interesting question: whether it was always present in the population, waiting for its opportunity to be expressed, or whether the means to express it actually brought it into being.

There is currently a vogue, apparently, for people to gather

together in groups and scream their rage in an uninhibited way—say, in the middle of a field. This is supposed to be like the bursting of an abscess, such that the screamer's rage escapes like the pus of an abscess and troubles the sufferer no more.

I think this to be a mistake. Rage often enters a positive feedback loop: The more of it that is expressed, the more of it that is felt, even if the feeling has a bogus, unspontaneous quality about it. If, even worse, the rage is expressed in a group, there will be a competition set up as to who can express or manifest the most rage.

It is important, therefore, to remember that self-expression is not an unalloyed good. Incontinent self-expression will lead, paradoxically, to the inability of anyone but the very worst among us to express himself. The age of artificial intelligence will lead to the abolition of the natural variety.

First published in [Taki's Magazine](#)