

# Essay for the Brady Competition

Ofer Bartal

[ofer.bartal@weizmann.ac.il](mailto:ofer.bartal@weizmann.ac.il)

Weizmann Institute of Science

If you ask people whether they would like to be watched, their privacy taken away, most people would definitely say no. It may be surprising then that many people have actually acknowledged the fact that they may be observed at all times, in the street, in their houses, in their most private places - in fact anywhere. People have also acknowledged that their actions are not merely observed, but that they may be in fact criticized for their actions, sometimes even punished. If you ask believers from whichever prominent religion you choose, whether it be Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism, this ever-watching eye has been part of society for thousands of years. No-matter what people may say about privacy, many believe their privacy has been violated, and many would argue that in a good way. Can this kind of information also be used in other ways?

In the book 1984 by George Orwell, a story unfolds of a society that has developed a wide-scale system of surveillance that breaches every imaginable aspect of privacy one may have. The information gathered by this system is used to enforce a totalitarian state, whose goal is to control people's actions and thoughts. It is a nightmarish novel and a good one as well. Nightmarish because it shows us what could become of our society if we take its path. Good because it stands as a signpost that can illuminate our way and direct us in which paths we should avoid.

The basic notion of being observed, in general, by some being, is not unfamiliar for many of us. Not only that, but many people accept the fact that this information can be acted upon, to help us in times of need. It is therefore not the information itself, but its specific usage, that worries society. I would like to ask of you - please raise your hand if it worries you too.

Look around you. You are not alone. Everybody cares about these issues and let's just make a point of realizing that. It is meaningful to all of us. Our goal as scientists is to advance human knowledge in meaningful ways. My point is that this is definitely one of them.