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## From “Big Brother” to the “Gossip Girl” A New System for Total Surveillance

**B**oth George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the SF movie *Equilibrium* present images of powerful figures watching everyone. People feel frightened by these figures and the surveillance system they control and try to escape. Although this may be the expected general attitude toward surveillance, a recent American TV drama shows a completely different response.

*Gossip Girl* is about the events in the lives of privileged teenagers from the rich families on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. The show focuses mainly on their loves and friendships, their family issues and their possible futures. Although none of these topics is unusual for television drama, the show has one unique feature: everything is narrated by an unidentified girl who calls herself the “Gossip Girl.” The Gossip Girl runs a blog on which all the information about the lives of the Upper East Siders is constantly updated with the help of those the Gossip Girl refers to as her “sources”. Everyone on the show has a cell phone, and when they see something interesting or something worth watching, they grab their camera phones, take a picture, and forward it to the Gossip Girl’s blog. They can also forward valuable information to the Gossip Girl, information which she usually texts along too. In this way, the Gossip Girl

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knows everything and seeks to let others know as quickly as possible too. In this way, she is reminiscent of the surveillance system figures of “Big Brother” in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the “Father” in *Equilibrium*.

The big difference is the anonymity of the Gossip Girl in comparison with the more traditional totalitarian surveillance figures. The real owner of the power and discipline on this TV show is not so much a young woman with a real name and identity living somewhere in Manhattan but rather the mechanism she has set in motion, the Gossip Girl blog itself. In this sense, everyone and anyone can be or can become the Gossip Girl. For example, at one point in the show, one of the main characters, a young man named Nate, was spending time together with a girl who was not his girlfriend. As the two of them were saying goodbye, Nate gave her a hug. Another girl, who probably did not know Nate in person, captured this hug on her mobile phone and uploaded it to the Gossip Girl. In this world, everyone’s eyes have become a kind of surveillance camera. These eyes are ready to watch and record anything and everything. With the spread of digital devices and the pervasiveness of cyber space, a genuine surveillance system has become possible in the modern world.

The *Gossip Girl* plays with the theme of the interchangeable role of the observer and the observed. Generally, there has been a clear distinction between those who observe and those who get observed, even though theoretically anyone can take up either position. In the world of the Gossip Girl, the distinction has disappeared: everyone watches and everyone may be being watched at the same time. Even the main characters, the ones who are most likely to be targeted for surveillance, use the blog for their own purposes. For example, at one point, Chuck sent information to the Gossip Girl about his girl he desired, saying that she had slept with two guys who

were best friends (one of whom turned out to be Chuck himself). Through the Gossip Girl's text message, everyone immediately had access to this information. Chuck's devious purpose was to prevent the girl from going back to her boyfriend, who was the other man she had slept with. His trick succeeded. Once everyone knew what the girl had done, she was powerless to control her situation. In this sense, what was important was not so much what had happened but rather that what happened had become known to everyone via the blog. In this way, knowledge obtained through surveillance has become a form of power. After the revelation of what she had done, the girl became obsessed that her reputation was in jeopardy and revealed to her friend that the incident would be fatal. In a way, this predicament shows the positive, or at least the effective, function of surveillance in the sense that it serves to make people observe the right kind of action, thereby helping the community to stay moral.

While the people in the Gossip Girl world still care and sometimes even worry about being watched, their overall attitude toward surveillance is surprisingly tolerant. As the title might suggest, this world of surveillance is actually enjoyable since gossip is something that many people find pleasurable. People who are gossiped about often find it painful, but even these victims recognize that gossip about other people is a source of amusement. In this sense, the attitude toward surveillance in *Gossip Girl* is very different from that in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Equilibrium*. In *Gossip Girl*, surveillance is something amusing when others are the target and only annoying when it concerns oneself. Modern technology and culture, which includes such things as cyber space, camera phones, and popular blogs, have made it possible to show a surveillance system in a more realistic way. In *Gossip Girl*, we see a change from the disciplinary male figures of "Big Brother" and "Father" into an entertaining and light-hearted female figure. A whole new world of potential surveillance has thereby been

uncovered.