

My Body, My Data: Orwell, Social Media, and #MeToo



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“Big Brother Is Watching You” is the doublethink watchword that shadows over the dystopian world of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Big Brother, the created, semi-dictatorial, full-totalitarian nickname for the governmental surveillance machine, has become a nomenclature in today’s society for the government observing its citizens and enforcing its will over them. In the book and various media adaptations of Orwell’s dystopia, Big Brother is usually a fictitious non-entity, a presence that is always present but never a specific character, either vested in a representative like O’Brien or given representation in a TV screen that the characters watch and that in turn watches the characters. However, in the 2016 video game *Orwell* and its 2018 sequel *Orwell: Ignorance Is Strength*, the audience takes the spot behind Big Brother’s TV screen and becomes an operator, a part of the institution that runs the surveillance software *Orwell*. In this paper, I layer the positionality of various groups in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Orwell* and bring them into conversation to create a theoretical matrix of interaction that can be applied to online activism. I use this matrix to approach how social media and the #MeToo movement use and abuse two specific types of bodies—that of the survivor of sexual violence and that of the survivor’s data—to enact sexual justice and legislative and cultural change.

Important to this paper is positionality. Positionality is a critical tool that was developed through epistemology, in which it discussed things as they were and are in relation to each other—the nature of their position (“Positionality”; Rowe). Other schools of thought have used positionality as a way to critique and interrogate their respective problems and questions. For example, in race, gender, and sexuality studies, positionality is used as a method to determine how one approaches their view to determine their intersectionality; in other words, an author’s biases, viewpoints, and background position their approach to a text, a problem, or a question, influencing the conclusions they draw and the arguments they make (Mikkola). Positionality is used in this paper to determine how character and audience are employed and relate to each other in a book and a video game, two different types of media that both require the attention and engagement of an audience who can invest themselves in the created world where the events of the plot take place.

In the story world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Big Brother is an autonomous nightmare who represents the government. Big Brother acts upon the citizens of Oceania, while Winston, a citizen once ignorant to being acted upon, is awakened as a resistant individual to Big Brother and the various governmental ministries. While the individual and Big Brother are enmeshed in this clash of the oppressor and the oppressed, Winston, O’Brien, and Julia become the ways the reader understands the relationships between the oppressor and the oppressed in Oceania. In addition,

the proles, or common folk, exist within a nebulous field of knowing they are there but never given life through character. Four positionalities, then, arise from these points of intersections: the imaginary system of Big Brother; the Resistant Individual, who seeks to undermine the influence of the government (Winston and Julia); the Enacting Individual, who brings about the will of the system (O'Brien); and the Common Individual, who lives within the system with no seeming desire to change or disrupt the system (Fig. 1).

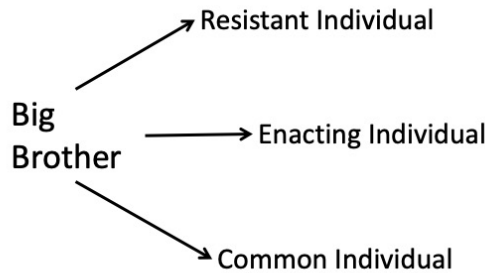


Figure 1: Representation of the three different groups that Big Brother affects in Nineteen Eighty-Four.

Along with their individual positionalities within the novel, each has relational positions to Big Brother and each other. Big Brother exerts influence over them all, as Fig. 1 shows, while the workers within the ministries and those resistant to the ministries position themselves against each other. I emphasize the relationship to Big Brother because of the hierarchical and almost-omnipotence that Big Brother exerts over the other relationships. Whereas the different individuals contend with each other, Big Brother still oppresses all. Big Brother is situated as observant, omnipresent, and almost omniscient (even though, within the novel, Big Brother hasn't yet completely penetrated the minds of the people). This positionality, then, places Big Brother over these people, gathering information on them, directing them, and being aware of almost every action. Between the three individuals, the interaction becomes more complicated, as the resistant and enacting individuals interact with each other in a battle of oppression, and the enacting individual affects the common individual's daily life through legislation and enforcement. Thus, a nexus or network of interactions is formed of the positions of each character that is both dependent upon Big Brother's influence and interdependent and interactive between the positionalities (Fig. 2).

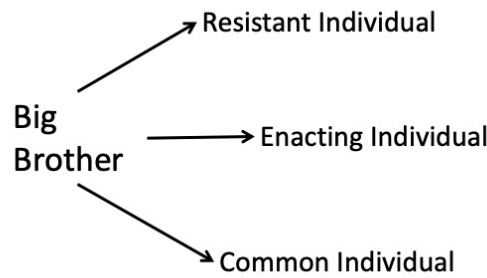


Figure 2: Lines drawn to show positionality and interaction between the various individuals Big Brother influences.

Yet outside the story world, Big Brother is not the only observer. The positionality of the reader, who observes the events of the story world through screen or page, is important to consider as well. The reader observes from an almost omniscient perspective, out of time and page, able to move back and forward through the events depicted in the novel and experience the text through their own imagination; therefore, the story world's system of interrelated positionalities becomes encircled by a solid line to indicate that it is within itself, as the reader is placed without the story, affected by and affecting the way the narrative is understood (Fig. 3). The reader, although outside the contained system of the book, makes assumptions about the world, develops relationships with the characters, and envisions the words on the page, thus interacting, engaging, and being influenced by the contained story world.

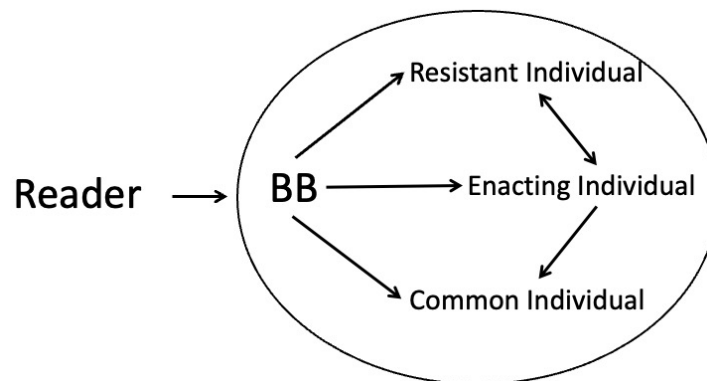


Figure 3: The system of interactions between Big Brother (BB) and the various individuals are enclosed in a story world that the Reader interacts with.

The positionality matrix of the 2016 video game *Orwell* skews the reader-text positionality matrix of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Figs. 1-3) by an important dynamic: instead of the audience passively observing Big Brother through the entryway of the book, they are now the active player who both acts as Big Brother and enacts Big Brother's will. Hence, in the representative Fig. 4, the game world's circle is dotted and porous. Within the game world, a freelance, outsourced employee of the Nation is hired to work as an investigator of the bombing of a public square. Managing a flow of information through the new aggregate software *Orwell*, the investigator-player collects data on individuals through access to news sources, social media, personal communications,

and desktop computer access, and then uploads various data connected with a character to the system, which provides it to an operator. The positionality of the player and the investigator is meant to be foreign, unconnected, and distant from the software to present a veil of objectivity, yet the character is still engaged in the story, interacting with it as the player interacts through the character. However, a firm line is drawn for the story to unfold: the game is linear rather than open world, even though within that linear trajectory, many decisions can be made by the player.

Managing the player-investigator's efforts is the operator, who resides on the other side of Orwell's screen. The operator in *Orwell* is Symes, a nod to the text on which it is based. Symes can only send the investigator-player messages and cannot receive any from the player-investigator; all Symes receives is the aggregated data that is input into the Orwell system by the player-investigator. The legislative and state directive is that anyone who is plausibly involved in a crime has state action performed against them. So, once the investigator-player establishes in Orwell that a person is a target—due to the collected data and the story the operator weaves from those data—the operator activates law enforcement to arrest that person. Thus, both the operator and the player-investigator make up a form of executive government as they develop a narrative with the data and information gathered to make consequential decisions on truth and reality.

In addition to the investigator and the operator using the Orwell system to discover who set off a terrorist bomb in the Nation, various hackers and activists seek to undermine Orwell throughout the game. The game simulates these hacks of Orwell by freezing the screen or messing up the language on the player's computer. The collected data are, for the first part of the game, on the activists and hackers to discover who is the cause of a terrorist bombing; but soon, the data collection grows out of control and the player must gather data on the operator and government officials, along with the hackers. As mentioned before, this makes the gamer's experience different from the reader's experience. Instead of dealing with a closed-off story world, the gamer must interact with a game world that takes over the real-world computer and has in-game consequences.

Even with these interactive differences, the operators, personal data, and activists map on to the positionality from the source text. The resistant individuals are the activists, the enacting individuals are the operator and the investigator, and the common individuals are the data gathered. In this reading, data become simplistic but also subversive, just as the proles are the masses who have the capability to be used to overcome the government. Indeed, the efforts of the operator, player-investigator, and hackers/activists are subsumed into the gathering of data—of each other's data and of their own data. At the end of *Orwell*, the player has four branching paths to gather data on: (1) the operator (now a high-end government official who would lose her job if her data were aggregated into Orwell; Orwell gets shut down); (2) the hacker-activists (incriminates the hacker as a threat to the nation; Orwell is accepted for use within the Nation; the investigator becomes an advisor); (3) the player-investigator (Orwell is taken down because it cannot be trusted, since the player-investigator can narrate data in a way of self-incrimination, thus proving it to be a flawed system); or (4) on all of them (in which the player

tries to incriminate the government official, fails, and Orwell is brought to the public's knowledge to neither positive nor negative feedback). However, even as these operate with each other, the system is not closed as in the book's system (Fig. 3). The player-investigator represents a human being playing the game and a character within the game; this interaction creates the porous boundary between what is happening in the game and what occurs outside the game (Fig. 4).

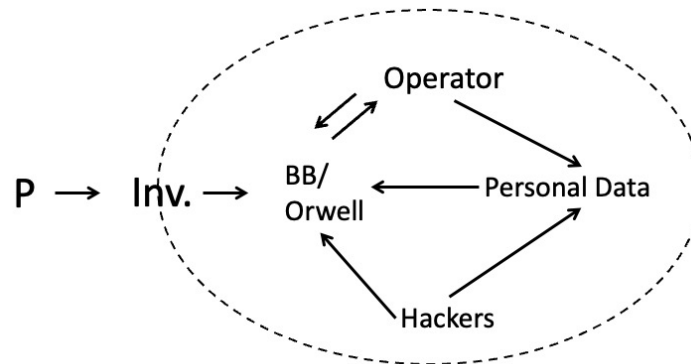


Figure 4: The system within Orwell places the player (P) interacting on the investigator character (Inv.). The investigator acts on the Orwell data aggregate system (BB [Big Brother]/Orwell), which has multiple lines of positionality toward the operator, personal data, and the hackers/activists.

Point of view and positionality, then, are very important in the video game. The interface is not a first-person shooter or an RPG-style game; instead, the game emphasizes the *player* doing the work of inputting information into the data aggregate system. The simulation of this aspect makes the player culpable and invested by the end of the game, since the data the player uploads affect the outcome. Indeed, this interaction could cause greater instigation for players toward activism and resistance, as they live out in the game world the consequences of a surveillance and that data are points of information that are then woven into narratives for action, rather than points of truth in and of themselves. Thus, this collapse of player and investigator, player and character, and their relationship to the Orwell system as seen in Fig. 4, shows an actionability that is not as strong within the contained system of positionality in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Whereas *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is an expression of a fear of surveillance, *Orwell* becomes a potential catalyst for action against a surveillance state.

The two systems—George Orwell's closed book system (Fig. 3) and *Orwell*'s porous player-investigator system (Fig. 4)—provide two matrices of positionality and power to then investigate the positionality of social media that needs to be understood as online activism is sought more and more for societal improvement. In the case of the #MeToo Movement, a positionality matrix brought into conversation with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s and *Orwell*'s systems will elucidate the potential cost that bringing to light the interconnectedness of sexual harassment and violence through social media has on survivors' experiences.

When survivors add #MeToo to a post, they are integrating their story with millions of other sexual violence survivors around the world. The hashtag allows the poster to join in a chorus of other voices that agree that they too have had sexual violence enacted against them. The act of

posting with the hashtag performs three vital actions that resist cultural assumptions and attempt to change cultural understanding of sexual violence: (1) reveals actions usually kept silent; (2) creates a community through the network-system automation of a hashtag on social media websites that connects various public posts; and (3) raises awareness and heightens the discourse around the subject through trending topics that can keep a conversation going for days, months, and years.

While these three activities are necessary for resistance, a matrix of positionality shows that the act of hashtagging also re-enacts upon a data body—a social media account that represents the tangible body typing the post—by the communal demand and personal action of the hashtagger (Fig. 5). In brief: the survivor chooses to express to the community through a hashtag that sexual violence has occurred to their physical body. The hashtag connects them to a community that can interact with them—a back and forth of likes, retweets, shares, and comments. The hashtag not only connects the post to a community, but also to a greater public—sometimes even if the person shares their post privately (e.g., screenshots and word of mouth can spread a person's private posts farther than the supportive communal interaction of allowed followers). The hashtag also allows data aggregators to collect, collate, and correlate the hashtag into statistical or marketable data.

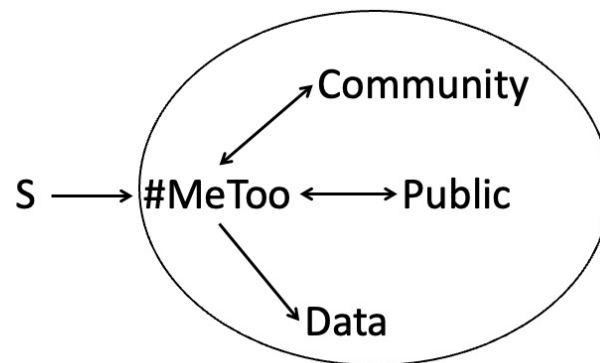


Figure 5: The contained system of the social media platform allows the post (#MeToo) of the survivor (S) to interact with a community, the general public, and data aggregation. The survivor who posted #MeToo is entering the post into the social media system.

Thus, a matrix of positionality of online posting is formed with a solid line around it to show an enclosed system. The circle in Fig. 5 represents the cohesive system within a social media website that the survivor's #MeToo post enters when they join the resistance against rape culture and sexual violence by speaking up. The matrix is similar to the one formed with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in which the reader is outside this internal system that is attempting to work itself out. The #MeToo post can be seen as its own body that, like Winston or Big Brother, is interacting within the system. This is not to say that #MeToo is morally or ethically similar to Big Brother, but rather positionally similar. The #MeToo post affects the rest of the interactions as the central figure to enacting the system of positions.

Social media is not simply contained within itself; it is devised to be social and shared. Thus, instead of a contained system, the social media activist must understand that social media created

a system with a porous boundary. The survivor still uses their digital, data body to send out the post with #MeToo into the social media system, but the community, public, and data have the potential to escape that system as the stories and information pass through the social media boundary (Fig. 6). This porous boundary allows #MeToo to be used to make cultural change, but it also spreads the post beyond controllable means. Once the hashtag is placed on to a post, the survivor loses control of their body again, the violence enacted on it being repeated, retweeted, and reformed through various means (from political activism to incel jokes).

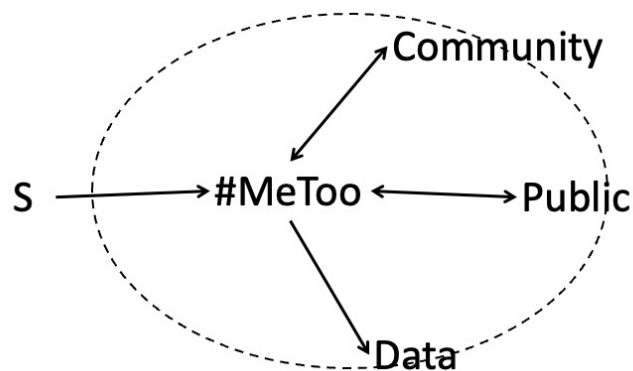


Figure 6: Instead of a contained system, social media is an open system that allows those outside the system to interact with what is posted and to then use it elsewhere, as depicted with the dotted-line circle.

This porous boundary, then, shows that the social media post is not its own creation, divorced from the creator, but rather forms two interconnected bodies, that of the survivor (S) and that of the survivor's social media presence (#MeToo), just as *Orwell* has the player and the character as two interconnected bodies. Fig. 5 makes sense when considering the data body created by the survivor, but with sexual violence, physical bodies are affected along with data bodies, and Fig. 6 shows that the knowledge of sexual violence can be spread beyond what the system.

Additionally, like the interaction between player-investigator and the *Orwell* system in *Orwell*, the #MeToo system can be expanded to include the action on the survivor's physical body—the sexual violence—as the instigator of the entire system (Fig. 7). Just as a game's story cannot be played without a player, #MeToo would not exist without sexual violence. In this way, we must be aware that as the collective conscious of culture encourages social media activism on behalf of cultural change, the act of #MeToo is re-ascribing violence upon survivors as they remember, reflect, and re-engage with the violence that occurred on their physical body through their digital, data body. While #MeToo can be used as an empowering moment of taking control of their body, it can also be their body being lost again to the maelstrom of social media, as retweets, quote tweets, shares, screenshots, and more take the empowering moment and twist it to other individual wills. There is resistance and power in using a hashtag to form unity and solidarity in experience, but it also reifies an act of violence upon a body, both reminding the survivor of the violence enacted against their physical body and having that same violence enacted on the data body formed through their social media interaction.

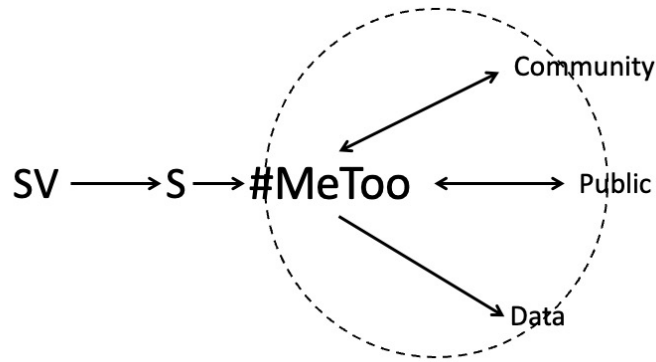


Figure 7: The porous system of social media where #MeToo is shared is performed by the survivor (S), but #MeToo and the category of survivor would not be without the first act of sexual violence (SV) on the survivor's body.

This insight is not meant to stop social media activism; it is meant to encourage activists to take a moment's pause to consider what choices of resistance do to bodies seen and unseen. In outlining these systems, I am acknowledging what might be gained and what might be lost in taking certain actions to resist and change a cultural system. These systems help activists to realize that the effects of an action have costs, and as we attempt to change culture, the desired effect and affect can expand beyond what was first envisioned or what was first instigated by an action. Indeed, these systems elucidate the need for both critical action and communal compassion in our attempts to resist.

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