

Are you a “Persuadable”?

Brian Keelan- September 2019

There is a very compelling documentary on Netflix called, “The Great Hack,” which starts out with the question, “Who has seen an advertisement that has convinced you that someone, somehow is listening to your on-line conversations?”

He gives you a moment to think about that and then continues, “You think that because your behaviour is being so accurately predicted. Ads that seem uncannily accurate make you think, they have to be eavesdropping on us but in reality, those ads are more likely to be evidence that the targeting employed by the sellers of those ads is able to accurately predict your behaviour.”

The documentary had me thinking of George Orwell’s novel – 1984. It is set in an imagined future – that would be the year 1984 – when much of the world has fallen victim to perpetual war, omnipresent government surveillance, historical revisionism and propaganda.

As you can imagine, I was quite relieved to see that in the actual year 1984, the scenario outlined in Orwell’s novel had not happened. Orwell was just a little early since the technology required to make it happen just took a little longer to perfect.

In reality what we as Canadians really got in 1984 was Brian Mulroney elected as Prime minister and Alex Trebek took over Jeopardy. Canada won back the Canada Cup after losing it to Russia in 1981. LeBron James was born. Michael Jackson released “Thriller.” The Apple Macintosh was introduced to the world with an ad that paid homage to George Orwell. (I bought one.) The Cosby Show ruled the TV airwaves and Purple Rain, Beverly Hills Cop, Ghostbusters, The Karate Kid and The Terminator were the best renting movies at Keelan’s Audio-Video Centre that year. Marc Garneau became the first Canadian in outer space and Trivial Pursuit was born – right here in Canada.

Here’s a little piece of Trivia for you to pursue... one of the questions in the original edition was: “What was the name of the country bumpkin played by Red Skelton on his TV show?”

The answer is at the end of this story.

So, in 1984 there was not too much to worry about on the actual 1984 totalitarianism front except maybe for DNA fingerprinting being introduced. Of course, there were totalitarian regimes in Russia and China, which – I think – provided much of the fodder for Orwell’s novel. They were regimes based on achieving their goals through brute force and a total lack of concern for human rights. It seemed to me – at the time – that all totalitarian regimes required a real asshole for a leader in order to work, but – when you think about it – those kinds of governments can never really work in the long run because economically they just don’t function and for a government to work, you need lots of money which you can only get through taxes or borrowing and that requires capitalism.

The Russian economy crumbled in 1991 because besides running out of people to beat the shit out of, they ran out of money. They decided instead to go after some of those oil dollars. They still have their usual asshole-for-a-leader problem but there’s a lot of that going around these days. The totalitarian regime in China also decided that capitalism had its strong points – namely long-term economic survival – and yes, even some measure of prosperity – which has today made them the second largest economy on the planet.

So, with all that personal historical observation in mind, The Great Hack tells the story of Cambridge Analytica, a British political consulting firm which combined data mining, data brokerage, and data analysis with strategic communication during the electoral processes. Their two largest clients? The pro-Brexit campaign of 2016 and the Donald Trump presidential campaign of 2016.