As George Orwell said, “Political power is the ability to make society believe that two and two makes five”. The satirical film ‘Wag the Dog’ (1997) by Barry Levinson and dystopian novel ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’ (1949) by George Orwell depict the truth of politics, in that Politicians exploit the fear and gullibility of individuals and society through their dishonesty in the media; allowing them to maintain control. Levinson and Orwell deliberately convey their own political opinions through tactful use of textual medium, form, and language features. ‘Wag the Dog’ satirises the nature of 20th century American politics, including the gulf war and the ostentatious publicity of presidential campaigns, prompting viewers to expose political exploitation and dishonesty in their own societies. ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’ was written at the beginning of the cold war to warn audiences of the dangers of totalitarianism by demonstrating the humanitarian devastation that results from unharnessed political control. It is through their different textual forms, that a broad understanding of the relationship between people and politics can be gained. Both composers use their textual medium, form and language features to act as a warning to audiences of the ways dishonesty and exploitation of fear are employed as vehicles to gain control by politicians; by exposing the impacts of political power on individuals and society more broadly.

Levinson and Orwell express the idea that political figures exploit the fear and gullibility of society by offering citizens fabricated notions of safety and security. In ‘Wag the Dog’, Levinson uses black humour to satirise the credulity of the people. Conrad Brean states, “One video of one bomb falling down a chimney and the American people bought a war”. His nonchalant attitude is created through fast-paced dialogue, monotone voice and a straight-middle camera angle. This mock-trivial and vernacular tone satirises the naivety of the people by presenting them as so fearful to believe a war from a video. It is this fear that allows politicians to manipulate them through the prospect of security. The false comfort offered by ‘The President’ in his attempt to protect the American people shows that it is the basic human desire and need for security that results in peoples’ gullibility and blind trust of political fear mongering. Motss’s phrase “[the Albanian’s] wanna destroy our way of life, okay?” creates an ironic effect. The hyperbolic language satirises the fear-mongering techniques used by Politicians to gain the trust of the people, by exploiting their innate desire for security. Situational irony occurs because Motss is blatantly stating that the Albanians want to destroy the American way of life, when in fact he is fabricating the entire war. This symbolises the dishonesty of politicians and the exploitation of fear that allows them to maintain control over the people. The black humour and hyperbole used by Levinson represents his view of the fear and basic survival instinct that allows people to be manipulated by Politicians.

In ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’, Orwell uses juxtaposition when describing the ‘Two Minutes Hate’ to explore the nature of human fear. Winston describes the Two Minutes Hate as “an attack so exaggerated and perverse that a child should have been able to see through it, and yet just plausible enough to fill one with an alarmed feeling”. The juxtaposition of Winston’s awareness of the absurdity of The Hate with the fear evoked by it demonstrates the unavoidable nature of human fear, and shows how Politicians easily exploit this to remain
powerful. Orwell also uses a hyperbolised comparison of war and survival to show how it is the human nature of security that enables peoples’ unquestioning trust in political powers. Orwell describes “the consciousness of being at war, and therefore in danger” as “[making] the handing over of all power to a small caste seem the natural, unavoidable condition of survival”. This comparison of war to survival demonstrates how politicians can exploit human fear by offering security, as people will unquestionably follow them when it comes to survival.

‘Wag the Dog’ and ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’ further explore the influence of the media in the relationship between people and politics, and depict how Politicians use the media to veil their true motives to mould reality with the ultimate goal of power. In ‘Wag the Dog’, Stanley Motss states, “War is Show business”. The chilling metaphor used by Levinson trivialises and satirises a situation as severe as war and shows the extent to which popular culture and the media are exploited by politicians to gain control over the people. The close-camera shot of Motss adds to the impact of the metaphor and symbolises the lies and fabrications of politicians that are used to veil their true motives. The diminution of the media by Brean’s casual comment; “What difference does it make if it’s true? If it's a story they’re going to take it and run with it” exposes the use of the media as a vehicle through which reality is moulded and manipulated. This portrayal of the media shows that truth does not matter as long as a story can be sensationalised and spread to the public, which in turn insinuates how this is exploited by Politicians. The dark lighting and low angle camera angle further adds to the dishonest and unscrupulous tone of the scene. The metaphor and diminution used by Levinson trivialises the integrity of the media, thus showing how the media can be used by Politicians to mould reality to manipulate peoples’ human instinct for security.

Orwell uses symbolism and irony in ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’ to warn of the impact of dishonesty by politicians through the media. The symbolism of the ironic “Ministry of Truth” is used to represent the nature of the media. Winston’s tasks of rewriting and manufacturing ‘factual’ evidence to distort reality in support of The Party is used by Orwell to represent the role of the media in society. The antithesis of The Party’s policies “War is peace. Ignorance is strength. Freedom is slavery.” critiques the veiled motives of politicians, and the use of the media that allows this to occur. Orwell also uses irony in Winston’s recount of his task to fabricate the existence of a war hero; “It was true that there was no such person as Comrade Oglivy, but a few lines of print and a couple of faked photographs would soon bring him into existence”. The verbal irony and casual syntax of Winston fabricating a person’s existence for The Party shows their exploitation of the media for their own motives and desires, subsequently concealing their true motives from the public. Orwell uses symbolism and irony to depict how the media is exploited by politicians and is used as a vehicle to manipulate the people, who allow themselves to be manipulated as a result of their fear.

Barry Levinson and George Orwell use their texts as a warning of the impacts of blind trust in political powers. The different forms used (film and novel) facilitate techniques that present different perspectives of the relationship between People and Politics. Film and satire techniques such as under shots, dark lighting and black humour are used in ‘Wag the Dog’ to
trivialise the naivety of people that allows them to be manipulated by the dishonesty of politicians, and presents Levinson’s judgement that “War is Show business”, which subsequently warns audiences of the consequences of their own gullibility. Orwell uses literary techniques including irony, juxtaposition and symbolism to warn readers that “political power is the ability to make society believe that two and two makes five”. The representations of the relationship between people and politics in these texts, serves to warn audiences of the destructive consequences of unharnessed political control.