



Hactivism is not a new phenomenon. But technology, fueling its explosive growth, has transformed “spying on others.”

Today it is changing the landscape of politics and commerce, war and peace. The world has moved from stealth information-gathering to super-sized cyber-sleuth budgets which pale in scope to the lightening-speed changes technology gives to seekers of information.

The genie, we could say, is out of the bottle. And ... like the genie-out-of-the-bottle stories of old ... sometimes that’s good. Sometimes that’s not so good.

Hactivism has evolved, from simple eavesdropping to more-sophisticated efforts. Let’s examine a few of history’s stories.

Our parents may remember the "telephone party-line" days. It was an easy way to snoop-around, then find-out what the neighbors were up-to.

Since most Americans had party lines, instead of private lines, all anyone had to do was pick-up the phone and listen-in to the neighbor’s conversation. The key, to a long listen-in, was to be really, really quiet.

Once you have the fruits of spying, how do you transmit that information? The key is to develop a code system which cannot be broken.

The U.S. government used one of the-most ingenious code systems of all time during World War II. Navajo Code Talkers, using their unwritten language, developed an unbroken transmission code. Widely used in the Pacific Theater, the code baffled Japanese code-breakers. Historians believe the Navajo code shortened the war with Japan by at least two years.

Only when the Code Talkers were elderly men were any of them honored for what they did. That’s because existence of the Code remained a national secret until computers replaced the need for man-made codes.

While the Navajo Code helped the Allies in the Pacific, cracking the Enigma Code was key to shortening the war in Europe. Risking their lives to recover an Enigma machine and its current codes, from a captured U-boat, British seamen delivered a prize which made its way to Bletchley Park, in England.

Working in top-secret conditions, Alan Turing and his Bletchley Park team worked long hours to decipher the code which allowed Hitler’s U-boats to sink so many Allied ships. After the Bletchley team broke Enigma’s codes, German U-boats no longer had an advantage over unsuspecting Allied ships. Historians believe this work shortened the war in Europe by two years.

A question about his knowledge of that code-breaking, and the disastrous bombing of Coventry, has long loomed-over Winston Churchill. Did the Prime Minister know that Coventry was about to be destroyed, because of information gained from his code breakers? Did he do nothing to warn Coventry’s residents so Germany would not suspect their code had been broken?

And ... what about the man most responsible for breaking the code which helped the Allies win the war in Europe? What happened to him?

Like the Navajo Code Talkers, Turing and his team could not be recognized for their war-ending efforts until much later. Unlike the Code Talkers, who were eventually honored, Alan Turing endured a much-different fate.

In 1951, he was elected a fellow of the Royal Society. The following year, Turing was arrested when the British government learned he was gay. Homosexuality was a criminal offense in Britain at the time.

Beyond the humiliation of a trial, Turing had a choice of punishment: prison or chemical castration. He accepted estrogen injections for a year, then committed suicide, in 1954, when he took a bite from a cyanide-laced apple.

Between the time of his trial and death, when his top-security clearance was revoked, Turing wrote a paper on another code which he thought he’d cracked: How identical cells differentiate by means of morphogenesis.

Sixty years later - on the 10th of March, 2014 - scientists from Brandeis University and the University of Pittsburgh proved Turing right. His ideas will be used for 21st century progress.

Mary, Queen of Scots tried to make progress in her century - the 16th - but her life was cut short when another type of code was hacked. This one was a set-up, by Francis Walsingham (Queen Elizabeth's chief of spying).

Intercepting a coded letter from the house-arrested Mary to one of her supporters, Walsingham used the decoded "Babington Plot" letter to charge Mary with treason. Enduring a trial without legal representation, she was easily convicted and sentenced to death by beheading.

Two centuries later, Benedict Arnold avoided a trial altogether after his coded communications to give-up West Point (for the equivalent of \$1 million in today's money) fell into the hands of American patriots. While Arnold fled to England, his British partner-in-crime (John Andre) was hanged (by order of General George Washington).

Hacktivism, thus, is hardly a new phenomenon. The modern world provides new and growing methods, but the motives of seeking information, to be used for or against others, is rooted in mankind's history.

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