Decode this

Description

Political statements come coded: â??I think thereâ??s blame on both sides. I donâ??t have any doubt about it and you donâ??t have any doubt about it either.â?• That was Trump on the white supremacist contingent at the Unite the Right demonstration in Charlottesville this week (with violence resulting in deaths and injury). The statement sounds balanced and reasonable.

Here is the tactic. Whenever someone â??calls outâ?• (as the Americans say) something bad, people supporting the bad side simply point out something similarly bad on the side of the critics. According to a telling article by Dan Zak, thatâ??s â??whataboutism.â?• It is â??the practice of short-circuiting an argument by asserting moral equivalency between two things that arenâ??t necessarily comparable.â?• Itâ??s also an example of moral relativism.

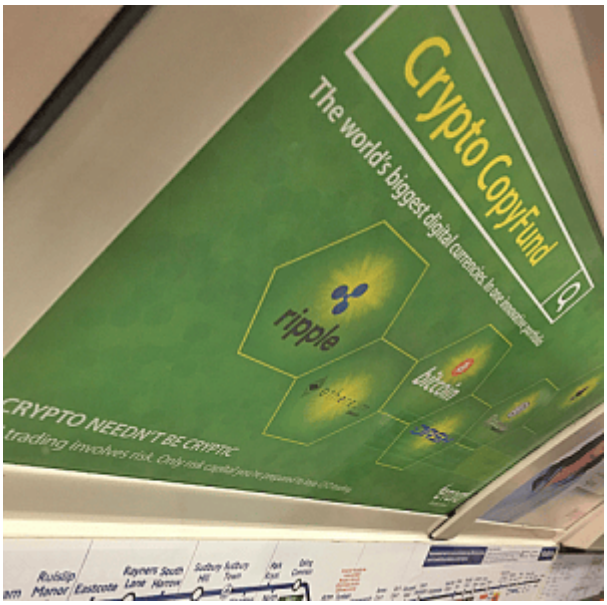
So Trumpâ??s statement decodes as something like: Donâ??t worry white supremacists. Iâ??m on your side.

That canâ??t be good. Of course, such decoding is a richly interpretive process, requiring an understanding of context, gets discussed and argued, and with interpretations that are often contentious.

To code or to encrypt

To code or decode a statement is to translate it into another form â?? more or less: ambiguous, enduring, authoritative, amenable to automation and computation, secretive, private or public. Semioticians, followers of Roland Barthes and informaticians have their uses of the ambiguous term â??code.â?•

At the extreme end of the coding spectrum thereâ??s *encryption*: â??To convert (data, a message, etc.) into cipher or code, esp. in order to prevent unauthorized access; to conceal in something by this meansâ?• (OED). This definition suits the Trump message about â??blame on both sides.â?• Indeed, white supremacists and Neo-Nazis in the US seemed to interpret Trumpâ??s message as a secret call to keep doing what they are doing. See CNN report.



Fun with encryption

There are many tools online for experimenting with encryption, e.g. https://codebeautify.org/encrypt-decrypt, useful for demonstration. You enter a passcode (or key), and then the message. You decode a message by similar means. Hereâ??s an encrypted message.

> KrWDiauQkW0ee8jxhGeRImNVDx/2kPuBI7DU/yd+9UN7WHzcHgjRKwUl

You could send that to someone in an email or a text message. If you attempt to decrypt this with the wrong key (e.g. â??cnnreportâ?•), you get nonsense:

> Â?$ï¿½>ï¿½ï¿½{O3ï¿½nk%ï¿½ï¿½ï¿½oKè?´ï¿½ï¿½LpPï¿½ï¿½ï¿½ï¿½ï¿½ï¿½8ï¿½Æ¨ï¿½k

If you decrypt it on that website with the right key (â??whataboutismâ?•), you get

> Donâ??t worry deplorables. Iâ??m on your side.

Apply the key â??relativismâ?• to decrypt

> RL/0bs6PmpWgoHxJ9RBipBfORSUDp1DFSUab61wVVzuCMBDKjui3

and you get

> I thinks thereâ??s blame on both sides.

Unfortunately, you canâ??t combine encrypted messages to give different outputs depending on what key you use. That would be useful. Then you could send the same string of encrypted text to a group of people, and individuals would be able to read those parts of the coded string meant for them, according to their own particular key. You can do it with a spreadsheet though.

Encryption on Google Spreadsheet

Jerry Barnes provides an excellent script that you can paste into the Google Spreadsheet script editor. It provides a function such as encrypt(A1, â??whataboutismâ?•) to encrypt the contents of cell A1 with whatever key you designate in the second argument. It also provides the function decrypt(A1, â??whataboutismâ?•).

Thatâ??s useful, not least if you want to create a public ledger in Google Spreadsheet, shared amongst a network of trusted users, but want to keep some of the information in the ledger private, or want to send covert messages to particular individuals. This works:

whataboutism	<<key
encrypted	**decrypted**
519DC52360D49D118E766637D02ECC85DB1BD2334B8E13FB89E0D2858D0E42AC82AF1294E4DA9D48	´Ø µYÎ9`#»s¶aÓ¥¦8â3ÿà§½2ÄXjûS
AFD9DC26B7A5B1145E4F65CB4F0EE2240B1900DB7E2D6F932BF9B4D5968788F6F29B14AEE5A8FD1A087A0EAC4AD50FD6	Don't worry deplorables. I'm on your side.

relativism	<<key
encrypted	**decrypted**
519DC52360D49D118E766637D02ECC85DB1BD2334B8E13FB89E0D2858D0E42AC82AF1294E4DA9D48	I think there's blame on both sides.
AFD9DC26B7A5B1145E4F65CB4F0EE2240B1900DB7E2D6F932BF9B4D5968788F6F29B14AEE5A8FD1A087A0EAC4AD50FD6	sç<ô[&N¶Öiß;ã)^Ty2#½X¸[N&¢ºÇã

References

- Barthes, R. (1973), *Mythologies*, trans. A. Lavers, London: Paladin.
- Barnes, J. (2011), â??Encrypting Data in a Google Documents Spreadsheet with a Custom Functionâ??. *Barn-Storming*, 19 August. Available online: http://barnes-storming.blogspot.co.uk/2011/08/encrypting-data-in-google-documents.html (accessed 19 August 2017).
- Byron Wolf, Z. (2017), â??Trumpâ??s Defense of the â??Very Fine Peopleâ?? at Charlottesville White Nationalist March Has David Duke Gushingâ??. *CNN Politics*, 16 August. Available online: http://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/15/politics/donald-trump-david-duke-charlottesville/index.html (accessed 19 August 2017).
- Zak, D. (2017), â??Whataboutism: The Cold War Tactic, Thawed by Putin, Is Brandished by Donald Trumpâ??. *Washington Post*, 18 August. Available online: https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/whataboutism-what-about-it/2017/08/17/4d05ed36-82b4-11e7-b359-15a3617c767b_story.html?utm_term=.a5586b68f69b (accessed 19 August 2017).

Category

1. Economics

Tags

1. blockchain

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rcoyne99