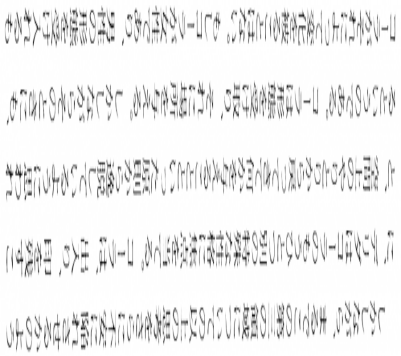

Crypto-sceptics

Description

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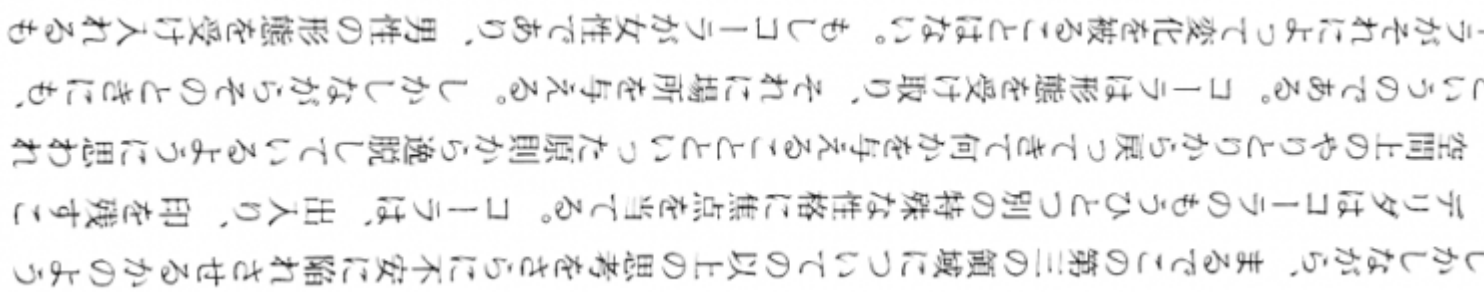
Encryption is an unfortunate necessity to keep our personal information and communications private. While we ponder whether itâ??s safe or not to Zoom itâ??s worth reflecting on encryptionâ??s negatives.

Critic Shoshana Zuboff writes â??encryption is the only positive action left to discuss when we sit around the dinner table and casually ponder how to hide from the forces that hide from usâ?• (95). Iâ??ve quoted that before. Sheâ??s referring to the way social media platforms plunder our personal data and sell it on to others. The only way to protect ourselves is to make our communications incomprehensible to the majority. Encryption is an admission of defeat in the face of a pervasive lack of trust.

From another angle, encryption diminishes the richness of language. The communicator invokes a procedure to translate a message into something that looks substantially different from the original. That new string of characters, the coded message, can be transmitted and passed around but only a particular recipient can read it. To translate your text into a language (like French or Japanese) means that others within a different cultural context can read and interpret it. Encryption is not like translation into another language.



Crypto-elites

An encrypted message gains and delivers nothing by its circulation. It acquires no nuance, accretes no new meanings. It is meant to be incomprehensible anyway, except to the recipient, and ignores

whatâ??s between the originator and the targeted recipient. Encryption reinforces an exclusive and elite relationship between sender and receiver. The automated translation into a secret code and back again involves no human interpretative capability. Translating the message into and out of its encrypted format is algorithmic and procedural.

We might think of cryptography as devoid of humanity. A message gets translated into code, which is then unpacked by an agent receiving it and according to an algorithm. Thereâ??s no scope for interpretation. Encryption epitomises the mechanistic, dehumanised and inauthentic commerce that is computer-mediated communication.

I donâ??t believe most of this, and Iâ??m not sure I know of anyone who takes an extreme anti-digital position. Iâ??ll now present some obvious flaws in this â??straw manâ?• argument. Also see post: Am I post-digital?

Crypto-moods

derrick vidermark

Historian of cryptography Katherine Ellison concurs with some of the facts of crypto-scepticism. (Sheâ??s mainly talking about ciphers): â??A cipher must be precise, and it must follow rules agreed upon by correspondentsâ?• (8). Itâ??s like a contract. Any two independent decipherers would translate the text in exactly the same way and recover the same original.

But far from the crypto-sceptics, she advances the view that the history of cryptography is woven into the history of emotion, and calamity.

> â??It is often a means of expressing loss or impending death, defeat, and struggle. It is often the last resort, an act of desperationâ?• (8).

See my previous post on the adoption of cryptography by city inhabitants constrained by epidemics and siege.

Crypto-errors

The art and practice of cryptography demonstrates that â??ambiguity, imprecision, and flexibility characterize human language *even* when it is ciphered and, arguably, create its richnessâ?• (8). Ellison shows that skills in the art of cryptography are human and fallible:

> â??The texts that provide examples of simple and complex ciphers are ambiguous. Cipherers and decipherers do make mistakes. Those imperfections, in turn, sketch as interesting a portrait of cultural history as do the ingenious methods that cryptographers inventedâ?• (8).

She reminds us of the rich language practices that contribute to the message that is to be encrypted and the meanings and actions that it may invoke in the recipient.

> â??Communication *in* cipher also requires communication not in cipher, before the cipher, when the rules are put in place and shared, when the message is decided upon. And this communication, in turn, is passed on orally or, in the case of the cryptography manuals, in printâ?• (8).

I would add: to imply that language is diminished by encryption is to denigrate telephone and video communication as bereft of human agency. Electrical impulses and binary signals between sender and receiver pick up no nuance along the way, but the technological system is at the service of the human agency at either end of the communication channel.

Crypto-ludics

The study and history of encryption in any case is not entirely serious. Historical cryptography manuals include outrageous examples: â??humor and playfulness characterize the history of cryptography just as much as the drive toward perfectionâ?• (8).

I surmise from her arguments that cryptography is as old as literacy. Itâ??s hardcoded into the idea of language. In her study of early cryptography manuals, she observes that â??the interpretive complexities of both rhetorical and metaphorical language and of language as always coded, and knowledge of the ways in which human languages can and cannot express experience, are central to ciphering and decipheringâ?• (8).

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Technically, ciphers are different to codes. The latter needs a method and a code book. She writes,

> â??A â??cipher,â?? in contrast, requires a problem-solving process and a set of instructions that can be simple or complex, yet they are also inherently metaphorical in that they require interpretationâ?• (9).

Another way of affirming the cultural value of encryption is to observe that ciphers are as old as secrets, which society couldnâ??t function without. See post: Secret listening: Private, personal, portable podcasts.

References

- Ellison, Katherine. 2017. *A Cultural History of Early Modern English Cryptography Manuals*. London: Routledge
- Shankland, Stephen. 2020. Zoom video chatâ??s full encryption wonâ??t be a free feature. *CNET* , 30 May. Available online: https://www.cnet.com/news/zoom-video-chats-full-encryption-reportedly-wont-be-a-free-feature/ (accessed 4 June 2020).
- Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London: Profile Books

Notes

- Ellison also observes the anxiety that came with the early days of print. The wide mass production and distribution of texts meant that the author loses control: â??the anxiety of mid-seventeenth century print culture: first, the awareness that the reach of oneâ??s communication was beyond personal control, subject to the critique of a massive audience both local and international and thus at the whims of diverse interpretations and, second, an awareness that reading and interpretation skills must adapt to the new reality of global communicationâ?• (13). Cryptography was a way of limiting the circulation of certain texts and thereby regaining authorial control.

- Image above is some text translated into Japanese and turned sideways. Itâ??s an extract from Coyne, Richard. 2019. Derrida for Architects æ?•æ?³å®¶ã•¨å»ºç¯?ã??ã?ªã??. Trans. Kenta Matsui æ•¾äº?å•¥å¤ª. Tokyo: Maruzen.
- Jacques Derrida mentions cryptography frequently, but Iâ??ve not yet found a discussion where he affirms that it is somehow endemic to language practices.

Category

1. Media

Tags

1. code
2. covid-19
3. cryptography
4. encryption

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