



## Codes and legals

### Description

**Code** is a useful term, not least as it has several meanings: rules, laws, computer programs, hidden messages. You can code and decode messages. The terminology around cryptographic ciphers is more restricted. It invokes meanings related to *hidden writing*. According to Simon Singh in *The Code Book*,

“A **cipher** is the name given to any form of cryptographic substitution in which each letter is replaced by another letter or symbol.”

The reference to “letters” assumes a message that appears to human beings in text format. Symbols as discrete shapes and lines corresponding in some way to numbers, characters and letters of the alphabet are similarly cryptographic.

Filmgoers, readers of detective stories and gamers probably associate *ciphers* with recreational challenges and mystery stories, e.g. Dan Brown’s novel, *The Lost Symbol* in which we read,

“The first character on the pyramid looked like a down arrow or a chalice that was the letter S.”

The association with mystery stories is reasonable. Cryptography experts commonly apply the term **cipher** to pre-electronic or digital encryption requiring codebooks, procedures and manually operated devices. The message recipient has at their disposal a means to translate the cipher back to plain text. The *cipher text* is the string of characters once the message has been encrypted; the *plain text* is the original message in ordinary language.

### Legal codes

**Codes** and *code breaking* come to us within a more legalistic and restrictive frame. Urban geographer Rob Kitchin means by “code” the instructions in computer programs that increasingly govern our

lives: “code and space are mutually constituted” (16), by which he means that code is “both a product of the world and a producer of the world” (17). Digital code pervades our urban experience. Urban theorist Stephen Graham makes similar observations by referencing “the hidden world of codes”:

“code-based technologized environments continuously and invisibly classify, standardize, and demarcate rights, privileges, inclusions, exclusions, and mobilities and normative social judgements across vast, distanced, domains” (563).

A book by urban planning scholar Eran Ben-Joseph, *The Code of the City: Standards and the Hidden Language of Place Making* sees codes as “regulations” that “exert influence and shape the global landscape.” Building codes and standards, many of which have changed over time, are hidden or latent within the fabric of a place.

---

## Bibliography

- Ben-Joseph, Eran. 2005. *The Code of the City: Standards and the Hidden Language of Place Making*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Handwerk, Brian. 2009. “The Lost Symbol” and the Freemasons: 8 Myths Decoded. *National Geographic*, 15 September. Available online: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/pages/article/the-lost-symbol-and-the-freemasons-8-myths-decoded> (accessed 28 February 2021).
- Kitchin, Rob. 2016. From a single line of code to an entire city: Reframing the conceptual terrain of code/space. In Rob Kitchin, and Sung-Yueh Perng (eds.), *Code and the City*. 15-26. London: Routledge.
- Lessig, Lawrence. 1999. *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*. New York: Basic Books
- Singh, Simon. 2000. *The Code Book: The Science of Secrecy from Ancient Egypt to Quantum Cryptography*.

### Category

1. Media

### Tags

1. cryptography

### Date Created

December 5, 2021

### Author

rcoyne99