How the West Was Won: Counterinsurgency, PSYOPS and the Military Origins of the Internet

Description

As the digital revolution was underway in the mid-nineties, research departments at the CIA and NSA were developing programs to predict the usefulness of the world wide web as a tool for capturing what they dubbed "birds of a feather" formations. That's when flocks of sparrows make sudden movements together in rhythmical patterns.

They were particularly interested in how these principles would influence the way that people would eventually move together on the burgeoning internet: Would groups and communities move together in the same way as 'birds of a feather, so that they could be tracked in an organised way? And if their movements could be indexed and recorded, could they be identified later by their digital fingerprints?

To answer these questions, the CIA and NSA established a series of initiatives called Massive Digital Data Systems (MDDS) to directly fund tech entrepreneurs through an inter-university disbursement program. Naming their first unclassified briefing for computer scientists 'birds of a feather,' which took place in San Jose in the spring of 1995.

Amongst the first grants provided by the MDDS program to capture the 'birds of a feather' theory towards building a massive digital library and indexing system – using the internet as its backbone – were dispersed to two Stanford University PHD's, Sergey Brin and Larry Page, who were making significant headways in the development of web-page ranking technology that would track user movements online.

Those disbursements, together with $4.5 million in grants from a multi-agency consortium including NASA and DARPA, became the seed funding that was used to establish Google.

Eventually MDDS was integrated into DARPA's global eavesdropping and data-mining activities that would attempt total information awareness over US citizens. Few understand the extent to which Silicon Valley is the alter-ego of Pentagon-land, even fewer realise the impact this has had on the social sphere. But the story does not begin with Google, nor the military origins of the internet, it goes back much further in time, to the dawn of counterinsurgency and PSYOPs during the second world war.

The Dawn of PSYOPs

According to historian Joy Rhodes, a renowned physicist told U.S. defence secretary Robert McNamara in 1961:

"While World War I might have been considered the chemists' war, and World War II was considered the physicists' war, World War III . . . might well have to be considered the social scientists' war."

The intersection of social science and military intelligence is recognised by the US Army to have begun during WW1 when pre-war journalist Captain Blankenhorn established the Psychological Subsection in the War Department to coordinate combat propaganda.

These grey-area operations, as they become known, plateaued during world war II, when military strategists, building on wartime research in crowd psychology, drafted social scientists into the war effort through the Office of Scientific Research and Development (OSRD). The office would aggregate information about the German people and develop propaganda and psychological operations (PSYOPS) to lower their morale. This culminated in 1942, with the US federal government becoming the leading employer of psychologists in the US.

OSRD was an early administration of the Manhattan Project and responsible for important wartime developments in technology, including radar. The agency was Directed by engineer and inventor, Vannevar Bush – a key player in the history of computing, known for his work on The Memex , an early hypothetical computer device, that would store and index a user's books, records and other information, and which would go on to inspire most major advancements in the development of personal computers over the next 70 years.

As the second world war ended, and a new threat emerged from post war ravaged Europe, scholars and soldiers once again reunited to defeat an invisible and aggressively expansionist adversary.

Across the Soviet satellites in Europe and in the nations threatened by communism in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, cold war special operations, as they become known, were a nebulous category of military activity that included psychological and political warfare, guerrilla operations and counterinsurgency. To mobilise these 'special warfare tactics' the army established the Office of the Chief of Psychological Warfare (OCPW) in 1951, whose mission was to recruit, organise, equip, train, and provide doctrinal support to Psywarriors.

The office was directed by General Robert McClure, a founding father of psychological warfare and friend of the Shah of Iran, who was instrumental in the overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddegh in the 1953 Iranian coup d'état.

Integral to the projects of McClure's OCPW, was a quasi-academic institution with a long history of military service called the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF). Founded by anthropologist turned FBI whistle-blower George Murdock, HRAF was set up to collect and standardise data on primitive cultures

around the world. During WW2 its researchers worked hand in glove with naval intelligence to develop propaganda materials that would help the US liberate pacific nations from Japanese control. By 1954, the department had grown into an inter-university consortium of 16 academic institutions, funded by the army, CIA, and private philanthropies.

In 1954 the OCPW negotiated a contract with the HRAF to author a series of special warfare handbooks, disguised as scholarship, that sought to understand the intellectual and emotional character of strategically important people, particularly their thoughts, motivations and actions, with entire chapters compiled on the attitudes and subversive potentials of foreign nationals, while other chapters focussed on the means of transmitting propaganda in each target nation, whether news, radio or word of mouth. This was, of course, decades before the internet.

SORO

In 1956, the Special Operations Research Office (SORO) emerged from these programs. Charged with managing the US Army's psychological and unconventional warfare tactics during the cold war and taking the work of HRAF to the next level, SORO set about the monumental task of defining the political and social causes of Communist revolution, the laws governing social change and the theories of communication and persuasion that could be used to transform public perception.

SORO formed a central component of the Pentagons militarisation of social research, and particularly the ideas and doctrine that would usher in a gradual shift towards an American-led world order. Its research team was located on the campus of American University in Washington, D.C, and comprised the era's pre-eminent intellectuals and academics. SORO's ensemble team, from the fields of psychology, sociology and anthropology, would immerse themselves in social system theory, analysing the society and culture of numerous target countries, particularly in Latin America, while confronting the universal laws governing social behaviour and the mechanisms of communication and persuasion in each jurisdiction. If the US Army could understand the psychological factors that sparked revolution, they could, in theory, predict and intercept revolutions before they got off the ground.

SORO was part of a rapidly expanding nexus of federally Funded Research Centres (FCRC's), that reoriented academia towards national security interests. Working at the intersection of science and the state, SORON's, as they were known, advocated for an expert-directed democracy, regardless of the totalitarian consequences of social engineers and technocrats acquiring control over the thoughts, actions, and values of ordinary people.

In those early days of the cold war, academics and scientists working at the intersection of military and academia firmly believed that intellectuals should guide geopolitics. This was accepted as the most stable form of governance to take the free world into the next century. It explains how we have arrived under the rubric of the 'settled science' today. Or at least, policies masquerading as science. From the biosecurity state to the fundamentalism of climate science, much of what was achieved in those golden years of militarised social research shapes the twenty first century.

By 1962, sixty-six federally funded military research institutions were in operation. Between 1951 to 1967, the number tripled, while funding skyrocketed from $122 million to $1.6 billion.

But as opposition to the Vietnam War intensified in the 1960s, a growing number of intellectuals, policymakers and academics became increasingly concerned that the national security state was morphing into the statist, globalist force it had been fighting during the cold war and began publicly

criticising Pentagon-funded social scientists as technocratic social engineers.

This inspired a wave of discontent for the militarisation of social research to grip America, culminating in 1969 with American University's administrators banishing SORO from their campus and severing ties with their military partners. The move was endemic of the changing attitude towards these grey area special operations and resulted in the 1960's and 1970's with the excommunication of military research centres from university campuses across the US. A move that forced the military to look elsewhere – towards the private sector for their alternative warfare capabilities. Following a long tradition of public-private military cooperation, from the Rand Corporation to the Smithsonian Group, these quasi-private institutions were being spun-out of the military at a rate of knots since the 1940's.

Project Camelot

One of the programs conceived by SORO was 'Methods for Predicting and Influencing Social Change and Internal War Potential. Codenamed Project Camelot, the landmark program sought to understand the causes of social revolution and identify actions, within the realm of behavioural science, that could be taken to suppress insurrection. The goal, according to defence analyst, Joy Rhodes, was 'to build a radar system for left wing revolutionaries.' A sort of 'computerised early warning system that could predict and prevent political movements before they ever got off the ground.'

'This computer system' writes Joy Rhodes, 'could check up to date intelligence against a list of preconditions, and revolutions could be stopped before the instigators even knew they were headed down the path of revolution.'

The research collected by Project Camelot would produce predictive models of the revolutionary process and profile what social scientists deemed 'revolutionary tendencies and traits.' It was anticipated that such knowledge would not only help military leaders anticipate the trajectory of social change, but it would also enable them to design effective interventions that could, in theory, channel or suppress change in ways that were favourable to U.S. foreign policy interests.

It was intended that the information gathered by Project Camelot would funnel into a large 'computerised database' for forecasting, social engineering, and counterinsurgency, that could be tapped at any time by the military and intelligence community.

But the project was beleaguered by controversy when academics in South America discovered its military funding and imperialism motives.

The ensuing backlash resulted in Project Camelot being, ostensibly, shut down, though the core of its project survived. Multiple military research projects picked up on Project Camelot's 'early warning radar system for left wing revolutionaries,' while its computerised database for 'forecasting, social engineering, and counterinsurgency' went onto inspire a nascent technology developed in the years to come, that would eventually become known to the world as the internet.

The Military Origins of the Internet

As Sasha Levine reveals in his groundbreaking book, Surveillance Valley, at the height of the Cold War , US military commanders were pursuing a decentralised computer communications system without a base of operations or headquarters, that could withstand a Soviet strike, without blacking-out or

destroying the entire network.

The project was coordinated by the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), created by President Eisenhower in 1958, for the development of technologies that would expand the frontiers of science and technology and help the US close the missile gap with the Soviets.

DARPA has since been at the vanguard of every major advancement in the development of personal computers ever since the cold war, culminating in 1969 with the first computers being in universities across the US.

A few years later DARPA would develop the protocols to enable connected computers to communicate transparently across multiple networks. Known as The Internetting Project, DARPA's prototypical communications network, the ARPANET, was born in 1973.

The project was eventually transferred to the Defence Communications Agency and integrated into the numerous new networks that had emerged. By 1983 the ARPANET was divided into two constituents: MILNET to be used by military and defence agencies, while the civilian version would retain the ARPANET handle.

Fast forward to 1990 and the ARPANET was officially decommissioned, and the Internet privatised to a consortium of corporations including IBM and MCI. Eventually the federal government created a dozen or so network providers and spun them off to the private sector, building companies that would become the backbone of today's internet, including Verizon Time-Warner, AT&T and Comcast. That's the same six corporations who not only own 90% of US media outlets, they control the flow of global communications, through a process of absolute vertical-horizontal alignment of legacy media with digital media, and the infrastructures and technologies that enable their mass communication, including cable, satellite and wireless, the devices and hardware, software and operating systems.

J.C.R. Licklider

A central player in the development of the ARPANET, who many consider the founding father of computing, was American psychologist, J. C. R. Licklider.

Lick, as he was known, was the first Director of the agency tasked with executing DARPA's information technology programs, The Information Processing Techniques Office (IPTO), that has been responsible for just about major advancement in computer communications since the sixties.

As Stephen J. Lukasik, a contributor to the ARPANET project reflected in his paper ' 'Why the Arpanet Was Built' 'Lick saw information technology and behavioural and cognitive science issues as connected.'

'Lick was essentially predicting how the internet would go on to evoke real world social processes that would radically transform how we communicate, organise and process information. It is no coincidence that a psychologist of 'Licks calibre was at the vanguard of a new technology designed to exploit basic vulnerabilities in the human psyche.

In the 1960's Lick oversaw DARPA's strategic interest in a new frontier of information technology, called Brain Computer Interfaces (BCI's). In his famous paper, considered one of the most important in the history of computing, Lick put forward the then radical idea that the human mind would one day merge seamlessly with computers. He was anticipating the evolution of AI and the role that DARPA

would go on to play in funding just about every major advancement in BCI technology over eight decades, including Elon Musk's fully-implanted, wireless, brain-machine interface company, Neuralink.

The Vietnam War

The ARPANET brought together the Pentagon's war machine with university research departments and the Bay area's counterculture scene. Inspiring much of the anecdotal idealism that would define the early years of cyberspace as a liberating new frontier for humanity. Cyberspace, it was lauded by its early adopters, would free information and provide universal connectivity. The realms of possibility were, indeed, endless.

But war hawks and intelligence analysts had other ideas. If the lessons of the Vietnam war were anything to go by, **the future of US warfare would not be with nation states,** it would be with ideologies, or more specifically, grassroots movements, such as the Viet Cong, who had the power to stoke the flames of civil unrest, that could lead to uprisings, or worse, revolution. Alternative approaches were, therefore, needed to infiltrate and disrupt this new threat to the free world.

As the war raged in Southeast Asia, another psychology PHD, Robert Taylor, joined DARPA as the agency's third director. Taylor transferred to Vietnam in 1967, to establish the first computer centre at the Military Assistance Command base in Saigon, a central pillar in the DoD's psychological warfare operations. The move was endemic of the changing rules of military engagement that saw DARPA, and indeed, this new technology, playing a major role in the war effort, both in Southeast Asia, and at home on US soil, against the growing anti-war movement.

In 1968, Taylor and 'Lick published their seminal paper "The Computer as a Communication Device." Laying out the future of what the Internet would eventually become. The paper began with the visionary statement: "In a few years, men will be able to communicate more effectively through a machine than face to face." Anticipating the meteoric rise of social media, particularly Facebook, in the decades to come.

Bringing the PSYOP Back Home

The origins of Facebook coincide with a controversial military program that was mysteriously shut down the same year Facebook launched.

The military program in question, LifeLog, was developed by DARPA's Information Processing Techniques Office, with the stated aim of creating a permanent and searchable electronic diary of a person's entire life – a dataset of their most personal information, including their movements, conversations, connections, and everything they listened to, watched, read and bought.

But would people willingly give up a record of their private lives to a military intelligence social media platform?

Probably not. Enter Facebook.

LifeLog, meanwhile, was ostensibly shut down. But this was not the first nor the last time that a project of this magnitude would be proposed.

In a 1945 article for The Atlantic, Vannevar Bush who, the reader will recall, directed the US Army's psychological operations during World War II, discussed his hypothetical project, The Memex, as a device "in which an individual stores all his books, records and communications, and which is mechanised so that it may be consulted with exceeding speed and flexibility."

In immortalising people's lives, it was hoped that LifeLog would eventually contribute to the emerging field of artificial intelligence (AI), that would one day think just like a human, intersecting with another DARPA backed project – the Personal Assistant That Learns (PAL) – a cognitive computing system designed to make military decision-making more efficient, which was eventually spun-off as Siri, the virtual assistant on Apple's operating system, present in the homes of 1 billion unsuspecting people.

But LifeLog is just one part of the story. There was another DARPA program that also 'disappeared' one year before Facebook made its debut. Often cited as the precursor to Facebook. The Information Awareness Office (IAO) brought together several DARPA surveillance and information technology projects including MDDS which provided Google's seed funding.

The stated aim of the IAO was to gather and store the personal information of every US citizen, including their personal emails, social networks, lifestyles, credit card records, phone calls, medical records, without, of course, the need for a search warrant. This information would funnel back to intelligence agencies, under the guise of predicting and preventing terrorist incidents before they happened. Reminiscent of Project Camelot's early warning radar system for left wing revolutionaries.

Despite the government, apparently, abandoning their gambit for total information awareness over ordinary Americans, the core of the project survived.

I draw your attention to Palantir, the spooky data analytics firm founded by Facebook's board member, Peter Thiel.

Portrayed as science fiction in the firm Minority Report, Palantir's predictive policing analytics have been deployed extensively against insurgents in Iraq and by police departments in the US.

This is, of course, nothing new for the Chinese. The convergence of big tech data analytics with social credits has been put to good use by the CCP to weed out and punish dissidents who can find themselves held indefinitely without charge or trial in political re-education camps for holding the wrong set of political beliefs.

But it must also be accepted, these Orwellian methods of repression did not originate in China. The encroachment of the CIA onto the public sphere has been happening since the 1960's, when the US imported decades of counterinsurgency from the soviet satellites to tackle the anti-war and civil rights movements. This was ramped up in the wake of 9/11 and now through the backdoor of COVID-19 total information awareness is coming home to roost, as China's social credits system has been implemented on the back of the Green Pass.

Before anti-vaxxers and conspiracy theorists, you had civil rights and anti-war activists. The ideology guiding dissent may have changed, but the military tactics used to counter it remain the same.

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