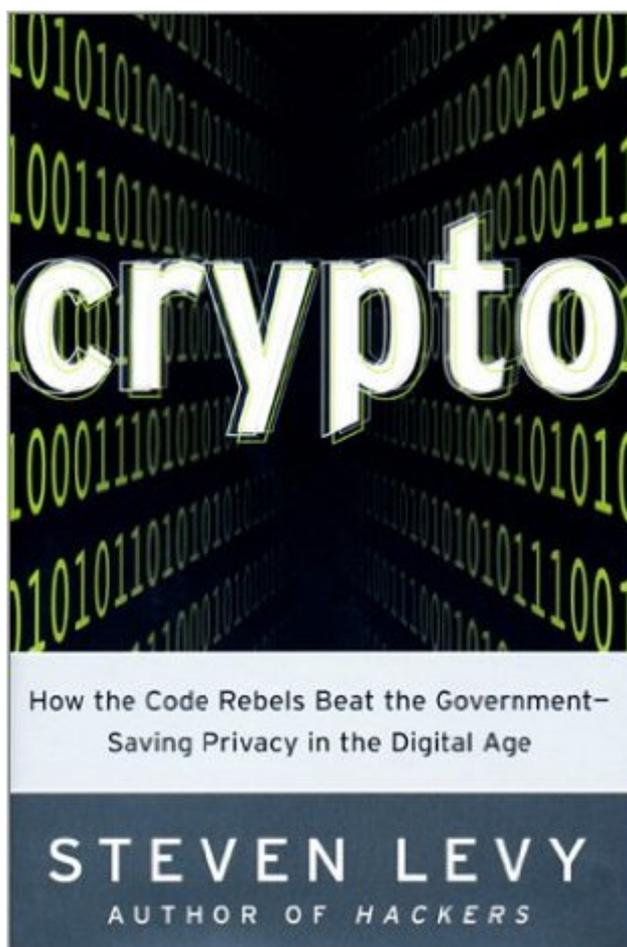


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Crypto: How The Code Rebels Beat The Government--Saving Privacy In The Digital Age



Synopsis

From the author who made "hackers" a household word, a groundbreaking book about the most hotly debated subject of the digital age. Crypto is about privacy in the information age and about the nerds and visionaries who, nearly twenty years ago, predicted that the Internet's greatest virtue-free access to information-was also its most perilous drawback: a possible end to privacy. Levy explores what turned out to be a decisive development in the crypto wars: the unlikely alliance between the computer geeks and big business as they fought the government's stranglehold on the keys to information in a networked world. The players come alive here in a narrative that reads like the best of futuristic spy fiction. There is Whit Diffie, the long-haired Newton of crypto who invented the astounding "public key" solution; David Chaum, whose "anonymus digital money" actually threatened the global financial infrastructure; and "cypherpunks" like Phil Zimmermann, who freely distributed military-strength codes under the nose of the U. S. government. There is also the first behind-the-scenes account of what the secretive National Security Agency really had in mind when it created the controversial "clipper chip"-and how the Clinton administration bungled the operation. Cryptography-the use of secret codes-has traditionally been the province of puzzle geeks and government spies. But just in time for the Internet-which radically alters the way we share information-a band of outsiders triggered a revolution in this once-cloistered field. But this was a revolution that the government wanted to kill....

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Customer Reviews

Levy is one of my favorite essayists. He finds a compelling story, researches it exhaustively, and then shares his excitement. The history of Internet cryptography is a perfect subject for Levy, who delights in recounting stories about technoradicals with new ideas who see them through to fruition. Encryption truly is one of the most critical technologies necessary for a smoothly functioning virtual world, and is very much the case that the U.S. Federal Government successfully delayed the general availability of strong encryption for at least a decade. (Future economists may point back to the last two decades of the 20th century and show how this failed government policy was responsible for the loss of U.S. dominance in the high-tech market.) It would have been easy to take the politically correct road and portray the Feds as being evil conspirators, bent on maintaining their own power and pride at the expense of the entire world. Levy chooses a more balanced approach, depicting the NSA in nearly heroic terms. He is especially sympathetic towards Clint Brooks (a name I did not know), an NSA lifer who developed the key escrow concept as a compromise that would allow widespread public utilization of strong encryption while still allowing law enforcement (and of course, intelligence agencies), the ability to intercept communications under controlled circumstances. If both the NSA and their philosophical opponents are heroes with noble goals, a tragic ending is inevitable, which adds an element of pathos to this triumph of democracy. As a former software vendor, I've been totally frustrated by both the crypto export laws and by the NSA attitude of "If you only knew what we knew, you wouldn't even ask that question."

This book is an entertaining account of many of the people and episodes involved in making cryptography and cryptanalysis a respectable and important topic of work for scientists and engineers not affiliated with any government agency. The incidents recounted that I happen to know about personally are well and accurately described here. But there are a couple of gaps. First, some of the key players "on the outside" are not mentioned; this may well be because most of those who aren't mentioned by now are "insiders." But this results in some of this book being a bit misleading. For example, serious work on cryptanalysis by outsiders, including one piece of work that Admiral Inman, when head of NSA, described as "the most brilliant piece of civilian cryptanalysis since World War II", was already going on by the late 1970s; this had serious national security implications, and helps to explain why NSA was so ambivalent about "outsiders" engaging in *any* crypto research. Overall, although NSA goofed badly several times, I think they managed to keep a more balanced view on the issue than I might have expected. The fact that Levy doesn't mention some of the key "outsider" work suggests to me that he may not have talked with (or at least didn't gain the confidence of) such people as Cipher Deavours and David Kahn, who could have given

him perspective on the "outsider" work that he doesn't discuss. Secondly, I infer that he was unable to get any of the NSA side of the story from NSA itself. This is a pity. It's presumably not Levy's fault; NSA only talks to people it decides to talk to, and then says only what it decides needs to be said. I assume that Levy tried to get information from NSA and failed; I don't know.

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