ARTICLES


“Aaron Swartz was not yet a legend when, almost two years ago, I asked him to build an open-source, anonymous in-box. His achievements were real and varied, but the events that would come to define him to the public were still in his future (...) I knew him as a programmer and an activist, a member of a fairly small tribe with the skills to turn ideas into code—another word for action (...)

I’d first met him in 2006, when he and two other coders sold the social-news site Reddit to Condé Nast, the parent company of Wired, where I’m an editor, and of The New Yorker. The three of them moved into a converted conference room in the corner of Wired’s San Francisco headquarters. Aaron stood out from his colleagues—he was moody, quiet, and blogged about how much he disliked working there.

Then, one Monday, he left the office to spend the day at a nearby federal courthouse where oral arguments were unfolding in Kahle v. Gonzales, a Constitutional copyright battle being waged by the law professor Lawrence Lessig. When he got back, he asked me, somewhat shyly, if he could write something for Wired about the proceedings. The resulting seven-hundred-word blog post was crisply written and clearly laid out the issues. I wondered about this young tech-startup founder who put his energy into the debate over corporate-friendly copyright term extensions.”

(Kahle is Brewster Kahle, of the Internet Archive cf. below)


“In the case Kahle v. Gonzales, argued at the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, Brewster Kahle is arguing that he should be permitted to make "orphaned works" — works whose copyright holder can no longer be located — available for free on his website.

The case began after Lessig’s loss before the Supreme Court in his previous suit, Eldred v. Ashcroft. Lessig argued that Congress’s perpetual extension of the copyright act violated the Constitution’s requirement that copyright only be granted for "limited times." The court disagreed, saying that Congress was allowed to modify copyright law as long as it didn’t change the law’s "traditional contours."

(The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, in San Francisco, covers California. The second circuit covers New York. –hence these two appear in a lot of cases.)

1
SCIENTISTS, WAR AND POLITICS

As a reminder the following note attempts to reformulate previous motivation statements: though not exclusively, we use mathematicians and physicists, in this section, as “next of kin” scientists relative to computer scientists - their history much better documented, and arguably longer, may be helpful we feel in evaluating, comparing even predicting their attitudes if placed in similar circumstances.

— Monk. Robert Oppenheimer

On Kitty Oppenheimer:

Books or descriptions of famous scientists’ wives and partners have tended so far to belong to the extremes of near-full attribution of merits when it comes to more recent ones, likely an attempt to compensate for older biographies’ biases, total ignorance or strong underrating of their place:

In Monk’s biography, Kitty is described in part. in chapter 10, “Fission”, incl. aristocratic origins (based on this, she seems to have been obsessively proud of them, while her father engineer appears to have been of opposite attitude).

At a New Year’s Eve party in 1933 she was introduced to Joe Dallett, the son of a wealthy German Jewish businessman and a member of the Communist Party. “I fell in love with him at this party,” Kitty later said, “and I never stopped loving him.” Less than two months later she and Dallett were married and living in Youngstown, Ohio, where he worked as a union organizer.

Very quickly Kitty discovered that life as the wife of a Communist Party union organizer was not as glamorous as she had perhaps imagined it to be. “These were days of poverty such as I had never before experienced,” she recalled with horror.

“We lived in a house, part of which we rented for $5 per month. Our only income was a relief payment of $12.40 every two weeks. The house had a kitchen, but the stove leaked and it was impossible to cook. Our food consisted of two meals a day which we got at a grimy restaurant. The price was 15¢ each and the meal consisted of soup, meat, potato, cabbage, a doughnut and coffee.” “Because of Joe’s insistence,” Kitty remembers, “I was finally permitted to join the Party, but not until I had done a number of tasks which were extremely painful to me, such as selling the Daily Worker on the street and passing out leaflets at the steel mill.”

Elsewhere, Monk notes : “[She] was almost universally disliked among his colleagues at Los Alamos and later at Princeton.”
The Lone Gunmen overview - more detailed

Ep. 1 of the Lone Gunmen highlights the different types of hackers: "black hat", associated with Harlow Yves; the corporate hacker, evoked by a contact of Langly, at the shooting range, who feels that Langly ought to leave the conspiracy theories behind and get rich instead; and finally those hackers who are neither nor, i.e. not doing it for money whether officially or illegally, but fight and use their skills out of some sense of innate justice.

"A hacker of your caliber ought to be floating in a Silicon Valley hot tub, sipping champers and counting his IPO cashola" [Kimmy]

Byers’s father expresses the difference separating the two as that he sees "a small faction" within the government as corrupt, while his son "indict[es] the whole government" : he explains 12-D’s background, a terrorist plan using a "domestic airline":

"The Cold War’s over, John. But, with no clear enemy to stockpile against, the arms market’s flat. But bring down a fully loaded 727 into the Middle of New York City (...)"

In all of X-Files’ disturbingly accurate predictions, from NSA whistleblower to pandemic, this is the most shocking one: Aired March of 2001, it describes a plane used for a terrorist attack on the World trade center, with a conspiracy of government involvement surrounding it, and war profit motives... What more can be said. (Including scenes of the plane before the 2 towers)
The Lone Gunmen E1 : plane heading for twin towers [r.] another good prediction : zine headline privacy-invading CPU

(Writing credits, in the order given top-to-bottom : Chris Carter, Vince Gilligan, John Shiban, Frank Spotnitz.)

S1E2 | Death of a hacker. More philanthropy ridiculing

Ep. 2, in the context of economic difficulties faced by the group, not enough money left to print the The Lone Gunman, renews the topic of hacker's dual nature at that point in time : idealism on one hand, and rare skills having become commercially attractive and in demand by the 1990s, at the latest. This tension is usually best expressed in the figure of Langly :

"I should be a dot-com gazillionaire instead of gracing you two with my hacking brilliance." [Langly]

Frohike, who after Langly comes closest in technical skills and regularly helps him, belongs to an older tradition of security/surveillance rather than computer hacking per se. Byers, whom we have called "the suit" previously, is most remote from hacking of all members of the group; but brings knowledge of the government and politics, acquired through his upbringing and father, and on his own, and is more of a "big ideas" man.

Langly, during this argument, calls him condescendingly "Mr. Big Picture, Mr. Mission". But, later, for example when a small nation - barely US-recognized a year ago - is mentioned he alone is able to provide information on the "breakaway republic from the former Soviet Union". Thus prompting Yves to comment "at least one of you who isn’t completely useless", breaking the tech hierarchy of merits whereby technical skills are equivalent to intelligence and even the basis for establishing an individual’s worth...

The episode has for story a recurring topic in computer science and technology : The death of a hacker : Double Bogey or DB, "one of the world’s best hackers".

To investigate the trio go to his home in Staten Island, where his mother, holding a graduation picture, relates (countering the official ‘drug deal gone bad’ version of events...) :

"Alex wasn’t into drugs. That much I know for certain. He had so much going for him with the computers."

However the discovery of a check for 1 million dollars by a "Philanthropic Outreach Enterprises" suggests it’s more complicated.

Here the series does more of the philanthropy critique and ridiculing established by The X-Files, especially as happening in the tech sector (ahead of their time in this regard, too). And, as almost always so-called "philanthropy" - done by rich individuals, families, or corporate driven - turns out to be bullshit : "PEO is a shell company", in this case.

A good hearted, well meaning, small minded and somewhat dim witted employee with a blind faith in technology and the American way at first :

"Blind football (...) God bless modern technology. Sonar helmets, beeping footballs. I know it will work."

Yet by the end, when told he was set up to serve as fall person for the organization, exclaims in a sudden moment of clarity "I knew it! ... Always talking about 'anonymous benefactors' "
The group conjectures that the dead hacker "refused to do the work", thus placing him in the category of hackers - neither 'white' nor 'black' - who act based on ideals, independently from materialistic reasons, corporations or governments. (The small state's government uses hackers to steal funds to crush local rebellions)

Ep. 2 shows a variety of computers (without attempting to hide their branding): a black Apple laptop, and IBM (red-green-blue) Thinkpads mostly... [600 series, right, T20/1 middle?]  

II. S1E2: [l.] Thinkpad galore at the Belemersk consulate [r.] Early sight of Lone Gunmen complete incl. future member Jimmy

At the end of the episode, Jimmy, the not-so-bright energetic and idealistic blind-football trainer, ex-philanthropy employee has found a new cause in the Lone Gunmen.

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Ep. 4's introduction is the Lone Gunmen's backstories as children - Byers, the "idealist", Langly, "computer god", Frohike, "man of action".

Langly's childhood is shown to be taking place at a farm in "Saltville, Nebraska". A 1982 excerpt of which:

Langly's father - I told you typing is for secretaries. That damn fool toy is going on the junk pile.
Langly - Let me tell you something about this damn fool toy, Dad:
This "damn fool toy" is going to change everything; From the way people do business to the way we communicate. This damn fool toy is the future. And you know what else? By the year 2000 (...) we'll all eat food pills, like on Star Trek, and won't need cows anymore.

Young Frohike envisions himself a "crusading publisher" "mak[ing] the world a better place", Huge Hefner is cited as example, and Byers junior aspires to be "a career bureaucrat with the Federal government" while most of his classmates want to be some version of 'rich and famous'...

In the present, Byers has driven to the Federal Files Depository in Owing Mills, Maryland a.k.a. "the Freedom of Information office"; where the clerk already says no before hearing anything, preemptively denying any request.

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1 These were the business, high end models of the time; the 700/500/300 series can be excluded due to small format, the 800 series were unusual due to PowerPC architecture and exorbitant price, while the rest are mid- to entry level offerings e.g. A-series, < 500 numbered models.
Byers - carrying a document (presumably a letter of approval for his FOI request) - isn’t deterred: "I got the e-mail this morning."

II. The Lone Gunmen  

Byers at the Freedom of Information office

Back at the base, Langly plays a computer game (evocative of strategy video games like Age of Empires or Stronghold):

Frohike - Thanks for the help, BARON.
Langly - Prince, I made prince 6 hours ago.
Jimmy - Can you make those little guys shoot at each other?
Langly - It’s not the point, Jimmy. This game isn’t about violence: it’s about empire building.
        I spent _2_ solid weeks creating this medieval civilisation from the ground up.
Langly - And yet you’re still a 32-year old virgin.

Byers, having returned, about the FOI response in the form of a large and obviously very heavy box, announces "Maybe the system does work."

II. FOI response: a big box containing a cinder block  
[r.] Langly and empire-building video game

"I keep telling you, Byers: the FOI’s a complete waste of time", Langly comments from a distance.

However a single sheet is found beneath the cinder block contained in the box, almost entirely redacted except for a shipping number, authorizing initials, and a name: Stan Mizer. Either a genius or crazy person, possible inventor of car run on water.

Frohike feels very strongly about the matter, which has ecological significance:

Byers. He died in what? Mid-70s.
Frohike. I know somebody threatened him. Big oil most likely. They’d do anything to protect their interests. ...
        A car that ran on water. NOT gasoline. Same horsepower, but zero pollution. An endless supply of energy.
        Can’t you see how that would have changed the world?
Frohike may be referencing any number of events during the 20th century, but the 1953 Iran coup, overthrow of Mosaddegh, and British Petroleum (BP) involvement come to mind. The pattern is always the same: nationalization of resources, here oil, or copper in Chile, followed by UK/US 'spreading of democracy' - who know so much about it, as evidenced by their own implementation at home, that they should share it with the entire world, leaving no stone unturned, no mind untouched...

**S1E5** Conspiracy about a politician: US Senator, an affair, and a murder mystery (Clinton based? ”this young woman, Miss Bonabo” phrasing, ”Senator skirt-chaser”, ”a married man”, ”[he] could go to the White House”, blue colors campaign)

A politician the likes of a Clinton or Obama is the subject of the story: the kind that is able to make beautiful discourses about the ‘less fortunate’, before acting against their interests (“When he got up there to Washington and poured his heart out about making sure that the needy weren’t forgotten, he changed people’s minds”...)

One Black Gospel group sings ”Oh happy day! when the Senator walks” – at which point the satire has truly reached un-liberal, dangerous levels.

Ep. 5 highlights all of the vacuousness, emptiness of the two-capitalist- parties politics in the United States after the crushing of mass left politics (as it existed at its height up to the 1930s, in that country). It also exposes the role of main media in this: A journalist only starts asking critical questions to the politician running once fed unofficial lines - which the station recognizes immediately because by their admittance he is way too dumb to come up with such interrogation by himself.

As part of their investigation into the Senator’s affairs, the Lone Gunmen end up having to care for a baby: Langly reads him ”bed time stories” about the FBI’s Internet surveillance activities, and complains it did not come with an ”instruction manual”.

Hacker Langly’s gender, in episode 5, becomes three times(!) at least a topic, due to long hair in particular and mild androgyny: once with a police officer who uses these features to mock him (calling him multiple times a woman), then again for comic purposes confused as nurse, implied female, by an elderly physician with bad vision, and at the end baby-sitting.

(Langly t-shirt in this episode: Ramones ‘Wanted’ cuidado! armados y peligrosos.)


**S1E6** Conspiracy w Lynchian accents | Thomas Schnauz | The Bouncing Souls ‘Hopeless Romantic’

Ep. 6: a man approaches the Lone Gunmen with a story involving aliens, parallel universes, abductions etc. that, at first, seems like a caricature of an old X-Files (which may be a meta-commentary on the original series). Byers comments that identity theft is ”a growing problem” on the Internet these days, and promptly turns down the case. But here Jimmy’s naivete has advantages over Byers’ experienced weariness:

He notices some sort of interface or port, (Byers calls it an ”electrical contact”), on the man’s neck, who believes his life has been stolen, leading to further tests at the hackers’ base and the discovery of wiring.
Mid episode the bizarre story takes a drastic, shocking turn (similar to the unveiling of another 'world' or truth in Dark City, Matrix, Truman Show, etc.). UFO, green men, tinfoil hats are discarded momentarily for a more science rooted cause or explanation (“earthbound”, Byers puts it) : someone is apparently running a "VR" experiment on an unprecedented scale; middle America, suburbia are its test subjects.

However, if this is established and accepted, the other question of 'why?' comes up, asked by Langly. In other words, if not aliens, why would humans want to do such a thing : the issue of intentions, and possible profits, benefits is raised :

"Why would someone pump him with images, make him think he’s got a home, and a wife, and all that?"

All the more relevant as Mr. Burgess appears to have no extraordinary traits, and in fact is the incarnation of average. (It might be useful to do on e.g. politicians, and at this point one can hypothesize that maybe one is a preparation for the other...)

Yves argues the wires found in his brain are "conduits for electrical stimuli" with the goal of "possibly behavior modification". Prompting Frohike to ask :

"If so, who was he before they modified him?"

Followed by a scene showing abrupt behavior changes in the man. (Triggered by a seemingly random TV ad...)

Lone Gunmen arrive at a conclusion, told by Frohike : "We think they allow you to see things and hear things and feel things that aren't really there".

After discovering his true identity, pathetic and tragic (Lynch’s work is a clear influence e.g. Twin Peaks), the ill-fated man chooses to go back to the simulation, preferring its artificial nature over reality. "Plug me in".

Its leadership insists everything is legal and "above board" and presents the project ultimately as therapy; although there are clear ethical concerns apparent in the practices of at least the leading scientist (who inserts herself in the world, and influences it for personal gratification).

Jimmy is not satisfied with 'how the story ends', and the outcome, unfolding as a final plea made on a (virtual...) porch is a mix of Matrix 'wake up' injunctions as well as a prefiguration of S11’s second episode : Langly mentions "perfect weather and great sex" in an ill thought out attempt to criticize the fakeness of VR and the value of real life.
Another laboratory and experimental research serve as the background for the following story (with military ties - a recurrent theme in The X-Files universe). There is a continuity between episodes 6 and 7 beyond this:

In ep. 6 of *The Lone Gunmen*, a life spent in a liquid tank decision-less was almost preferred over the hardship of a real life: Episode 7 begins with lines from Hamlet echoing a similar infatuation or state:

"For in that sleep of death what dreams may come."

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The experiment described: chimpanzees are placed in front of computers while readings of classic plays are being played, most of the test subjects managing to type gibberish.

But, from *Hamlet* one chimp has drawn subversive lessons (lines like "The oppressor’s wrong", or "who would bear the whips", were probably not such a good idea for experiment subjects held captive) and has begun work on a diary or testimony, *Short History of my demeaning captivity*.

A scientist notices the prodigy and greatly excited leaves the room to tell colleagues: on his return the chimp is found banging on the keys like the others - being intelligent... and already anticipating that intelligence in the world he has been placed in is a quality better hidden.