Timothy C. May, Early Advocate of Internet Privacy, Dies at 66

By Nathaniel Popper

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Timothy C. May, a physicist, polemicist and cantankerous advocate of internet privacy who helped start a movement aimed at protecting the privacy of individuals online, died on Dec. 13 at his home in Corralitos, Calif. He was 66.

The Santa Cruz County Sheriff-Coroner's office confirmed his death but said that the cause had not yet been determined.

As the rabble-rousing leader of a group called the Cypherpunks, Mr. May, in his writings, foreshadowed and influenced many of the concerns about privacy and government control that have come to dominate the internet age.

In the one-page Crypto Anarchist Manifesto, which he wrote in 1988, Mr. May said, "Just as the technology of printing altered and reduced the power of medieval guilds and the social power structure, so too will cryptologic methods fundamentally alter the nature of corporations and of government interference in economic transactions."

Much of Mr. May's writing, incorporating elements of advanced math, libertarian politics and even science fiction, was circulated by the Cypherpunks, a group he co-founded with John Gilmore and Eric Hughes in 1992. It inspired later online movements like WikiLeaks and cryptocurrency technologies like Bitcoin.

In recent years, Mr. May's legacy had been clouded by his frequent and unapologetically offensive statements in online forums. In 2003 he wrote that he would welcome a nuclear strike on Washington because it would kill "a million criminal politicians and two million inner-city welfare mutants."

His friends said that his troublesome views were an outgrowth of the style that had made him so influential.

"He would try to get people's attention by saying things in a deliberately confrontational way," said Mr. Gilmore, who later co-founded the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a nonprofit digital rights group.

Once he got someone's attention, Mr. May was interested in having an honest conversation, Mr. Gilmore said. "He actually cared about the truth and about coming to understand things," he said.

Timothy Christopher May was born on Dec. 21, 1951, in Bethesda, Md. His father, Thomas, was in the Navy, and the family moved frequently, to California, Virginia and France. His mother, Hazel (Heden) May, was a homemaker.

Mr. May in 1994 in California. In his later years he led a reclusive life and alienated old allies with offensive statements online. May Family Photo

Mr. May's sister, Kathleen Fox, said his unquenchable intellectual curiosity was always combined with a defiant streak. After being accepted into Mensa, the high I.Q. society, and attending its meetings, Mr. May told her that the members were a "bunch of dummies" and that they weren't worth his time.

Mr. May studied physics at the University of California, Santa Barbara. On graduating he took a job at Intel, the world's largest maker of computer chips, which had been founded a few years earlier.

Only several years into the job, after the company's chips had been found to be malfunctioning, Mr. May discovered the source of the problem through a process involving radioactive alpha particles. His discovery earned him his own laboratory and an award from the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers. But calculating that his Intel stock options could sustain him through retirement, he resigned at 34.

Mr. May set out to write a science fiction novel inspired by the evolving science of cryptography and the writings of libertarians like Ayn Rand and Murray Rothbard. When he struggled to bring off the novel, he turned to writing on early online forums run by groups like the Extropians and his own Cypherpunks.

As the Cypherpunks' most frequent contributor, and at the group's in-person meetings in the Bay Area, Mr. May advocated using cryptography to spread government secrets, as WikiLeaks later did, and to evade surveillance of individuals, which he believed would become more pervasive with the spread of computers.

These ideas brought the Cypherpunks into conflict with the government, which wanted to limit the spread of cryptography. But people who successfully fought to integrate cryptography into the internet in its early days, to protect the privacy of individuals, hailed Mr. May's writing as an inspiration.

"He was ahead of the game and understood what was going to be happening and what these obscure technologies were going to bring about," said Steven Levy, who wrote about Mr. May extensively in the 1990s for Wired magazine and in the book "Crypto" (2001).

In addition to Ms. Fox, Mr. May is survived by his brother, Michael.

Mr. May kept a careful distance from the real world, leading a reclusive life. He often wrote about arming himself and waiting for government agents to show up. After the Cypherpunks faded in the early 2000s, he began expressing racist sentiments to other online groups.

Despite alienating many of his old allies, some of his ideas have recently come into vogue again with the rise of WikiLeaks and Bitcoin and the growing concerns about government surveillance.

In an interview in October with the website CoinDesk, Mr. May accused social media companies of helping to "build the machinery of the Dossier Society," in which private citizens' personal information can be monitored and sold. He was also critical of the get-rich-quick mentality of the cryptocurrency industry.

"I cannot give a ringing endorsement to where we are," he told CoinDesk, "or generate a puff-piece about the great things already done."

Susan Beachy contributed reporting.