

Dossier Fingers Turn to Trigger Fingers

How Social Media May Have Saved the Black Panther Party

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Abstract

The focus of this research will be a somewhat speculative 'what-if' scenario of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense against J. Edgar Hoover's COINTELPRO FBI. It will analyze what consequences would have occurred if the internet and social media as they stand today were available to those forces at the time. The analysis will be based on the tactics the FBI used and the documented assassinations of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in Chicago that the FBI conducted. According to the FBI itself in the documents that leaked from COINTELPRO, one of their main goals was to discredit the BPP in the eyes of the black community, white community, liberal-leaning individuals and religious communities. This will briefly analyzed some of the methods that the FBI and the BPP used to communicate and how they would have been affected based on the current patterns of active organizations operating today. Despite this paper's focus on how new technologies may have changed certain outcomes of the Black Panther Party, it will not focus on social media analytics nor dive deep into the workings of the various social media platforms. To do so will require a full-fledged qualitative research and study.

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In October 1966, two Merritt College students, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in Oakland, California. This organization was founded in response to the local police presence that was constantly in the area harassing the black residents that lived and worked there. In less than two years after its founding, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense became the Black Panther Party (BPP for short for the purposes of this paper) and became the U.S. government, namely J. Edgar Hoover's FBI, number one enemy.

COINTELPRO

The FBI under J. Edgar Hoover and COINTELPRO, which is an abbreviation for Counter Intelligence Program, began their campaign against the BPP in 1968 (Churchill & Vander Wall, 1990, p. 128). COINTELPRO was designed after successful programs and tactics that the FBI used against communism and communist parties stemming from practically its inception in 1908. Hoover was convinced that the BPP and other organizations were black extremist organizations and he was determined to prevent another 'Mau Mau', a reference to a misnomer for the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, the term is suspected to have been their designation due to their enemies, British colonialists. (Mwangi, 2010, p. 88).

While there were many individual goals within the overall purpose of COINTELPRO, the one most appropriate for this paper was goal number four, pulled directly from the documents themselves and cited in multiple publications.

Prevent militant black nationalist groups and leaders from gaining respectability,

by discrediting them to three separate segments of the community. The goal of discrediting black nationalists must be handled tactically in three ways. You must discredit these groups and individuals to, first, the responsible Negro community. Second they must be discredited to the white community...Third, these groups must be discredited in the eyes of Negro radicals, the followers of the movements. This last area requires entirely different tactics from the first two. (Day & Whitehorn, 2001, p. 286; Churchill & Vander Wall, 1990, p. 110; Churchill & Vander Wall, 2002, p. 58.)

A surface glance into the BPP would reveal the fates of some of its most prominent leaders. Huey P. Newton was shot in killed “while in a spiral of his own drug addiction.” (Narayan, 2019, p. 58.). Bobby Seale residing in Texas, Eldrige Cleaver falling into poor health and passing away in the 90’s. However, the most well known and tragic was the fate of Fred Hampton killed by Chicago Police in a no-knock raid at only 20 years old. All of these figures were subjected to the communication sabotage that COINTELPRO implemented and arguably led these figures to either their demise or obscurity.

Informants and Correspondence

Fred Hampton was the chairman of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party. He was an NAACP activist whom Noam Chomsky has been quoted “one of the most promising leaders of the Black Panther Party.”(Churchill & Vander Wall, 2002, p. 64.) He founded the Rainbow Coalition, a union of various organizations and gangs in Chicago which united under the banner of peace and building community. However, due to the FBI interference, Hampton was unable to

align with some groups due to fake correspondence sent by agents and agitation of those false statements by Hampton's bodyguard and FBI informant William O'Neal. A rift was driven between Hampton and the leader of the Blackstone rangers Jeff Fort. An alliance that Hampton had hoped for would have bolstered the BPP numbers by almost doubling them nationally. However, FBI agents sent anonymous letters to Fort and Hampton, each claiming that the other blames each other for failed negotiations and that bounties are on their heads (Churchill & Vander Wall, 2002, p. 65.)

With the advent of technology, messages sent can be encrypted and electronic signatures placed on them to ensure integrity. Not only that, with the invention of cellphones and smartphones, Hampton and Fort could have discussed matters amongst themselves without FBI interference. Proof of this can be seen as easily as going over how the Occupy movement, Black Lives Matter and the numerous other movements that have developed since then have organized amongst themselves via smartphone technology and social media.

Fred Hampton's assassination I believe however, would have still occurred. Due to the nature of Hampton and O'Neal's relationship, O'Neal was trusted wholeheartedly by Hampton. (Stieva, 2018, p. 73.) O'Neal gave the FBI and Chicago police the layout of Hampton's apartment at the time, the numbers and arms of the people residing there and the location of Hampton's bedroom. In addition, the night before the raid, O'Neal is suspected of slipping a drug into Hampton's food or drink that would put him into a deep sleep. In the documentary "The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution" Deborah Johnson, Hampton's girlfriend who was pregnant with his child at the time, described the raid as a massacre (Nelson, 2016).

Churchill and Vander Wall also depict a similar scenario in painful detail. The Chicago police ran in with guns blazing and the only shot fired was by Mark Clark which was an involuntary shot that went off after he was instantly killed by the initial barrage of gunfire. Police then went to Hampton's bedroom, found that he was barely alive and put two bullets in the back of his head. Two officers were overheard in an exchange with one stating after the two headshots were fired "He's good and dead now." (2002, p. 73). Hampton's lifeless body was then dragged by the wrist to the threshold of his doorway.

The incident was immediately covered up, wounded Panther members were arrested on charges of attempted murder and aggravated assault. The Chicago police department tried to claim that there was an exchange of gunfire and even enlisted the help of a *Chicago Tribune* editor to sway public opinion. However, after further examination and witnesses going public the entire scenario that the Chicago police tried to paint was discredited in the public eye (Nelson, 2016)

In our age of every mobile device containing a camera, Hampton's assassination may have not only been recorded, but the false story by the FBI and Chicago police wouldn't have been believed from the jump. The public would have been outraged and the individual officers involved may have even been tried and convicted of their crimes. Sadly, none of this was available at the time so not one member of law enforcement was punished.

Conclusion

The FBI's COINTELPRO initiative against the Black Panther Party was highly effective in driving a wedge between its leaders internally and externally. Common knowledge functions

COINTELPRO vs. BPP

of today's technology would have lessened the impact of some of the FBI's tactics. However, technology would have also assisted the FBI as well. It is my belief that the Black Panther Party as they were in the 1960's and 70's would have survived and never disbanded. I also believe that public opinion about the organization would be vastly different. While arguably in our divided political climate, there still would still be much debate into the legality and intent of the Panther movement as evident by the divided discussions of race during incidents of state violence that occurs today.

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