

History and Sociology Graduate Forum Speaker

Co-sponsored by the School of History and Sociology and the School of Cybersecurity and Privacy

Wednesday, Feb. 24th @ 12noon

The First Cyber Campaign: Bletchley Park and the 'Extraordinary' Conditions for Intelligence Success

There is a huge literature about Bletchley Park, one of the most stunning success stories in intelligence history. Yet questions remain about how to explain the extent and persistence of British signals intelligence success. This case takes on renewed importance in an era of endemic cyber conflict. Indeed, the cryptologic contest of World War II, a duel between encryption and decryption machines, might be described as the first cyber conflict. This essay develops a practice-based account of the exploitation and protection of the human and machine performances that facilitate organizational control. I infer three necessary but hard to meet conditions for intelligence success and show how Bletchley park met all three of them. First, shared sociotechnical protocols for communication and computation provide the potential for deception. Second, the intelligence agency combines the strengths of both top-down management and bottom-up adaptation. Third, the intelligence target combines the weaknesses of both organizational modes. If these conditions are met, then an organization can construct a secret information channel for collection or influence, but even this success will only ever have an indirect effect on political or military outcomes. Modern intelligence operations in and through global information infrastructure depend on these same conditions, although meeting them is often more difficult.

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