

# Cyber Conflict History

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## Introduction

The study of cyber history can provide insight into the often complex and obscure dynamics of cyber conflict. An exclusive focus on the present unnecessarily handicaps efforts to understand, categorize and qualify past behavior. Cyber history provides a storehouse of information on past cyber activity, including case studies and datasets that can fuel the formulation of theories and testable hypotheses. In addition to serving as a laboratory—however imperfect—to explain cyber behavior, the study of cyber history also helps academics, policy makers, and practitioners to interpret ongoing developments. To understand why a cyberattack—like the 2016 Democratic National Committee (DNC) email hack<sup>2</sup>—occurred, it is necessary to examine the historical context in light of present conditions. Was the targeting of the DNC espionage, an escalatory attack or criminal behavior? Was it a continuation of long-standing practices? Have similar methods been utilized in the past? Why did the attacker conduct this activity? A relatively recent history often suffices to explain key cyber conflict events and trends, but in some cases, it is necessary to delve further back in time to fully understand the underlying causes.

There is simultaneously too much and not enough cyber history. The secrecy surrounding government organizations and their capabilities as well as the anonymity of attackers complicate the documentation of cyber history. Moreover, the recent and rapid growth of the field means the subject has yet to receive adequate attention from professional historians.<sup>3</sup> Vast amounts

## About the State of the Field Series

This article is part of the 2017 Cyber Conflict State of the Field (SOTF) paper series, under the auspices of the Cyber Conflict Studies Association and Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs.

The conference, held annually since 2016, brings together experts from various academic disciplines, including political science, law, economics, and policy research, to define key questions and map the research frontier in the emerging field of cyber conflict studies. The conference is cumulative: each year builds upon past discussions. As a result, discussions have necessarily matured at different rates as new topics are added.

The papers in this series are meant to capture the findings of the 2017 conference. Together, the papers represent the conference attendees' understanding of the present state of the field in the academic study of cyber conflict.

of raw data, case study reports, and other documents still await analysis and therefore leave much research left to be undertaken.

It is hardly surprising that SOTF devoted a panel to cyber history, given its importance and the work that remains to be done. SOTF first included a cyber history panel, with Jason Healey moderating, in 2016. Karl Grindal summarized the key views of the panelists and provided a comprehensive overview of canonical works in the field.<sup>4</sup> The 2017 panel built on that of the previous year with only minor changes. The

table below provides an overview of the topics on the agenda at the State of the Field conferences in 2016 and 2017.

TOPICS		
	STATE OF THE FIELD 2016	STATE OF THE FIELD 2017
I	Origins of the Cyber Domain	Conceptual History
II	Development of the Field	History of Cyber Conflict Discourse
III	Eras in Cyber Conflict History	Eras in Cyber Conflict History
IV	Organizational History	Organizational History
V	Operational History	Operational and Strategic History*
VI	History of Non-State Actors	

\* On agenda but not discussed during workshop due to lack of time.

## Major Takeaways from SOTF 2017

Discerning the continuities and discontinuities of cyber conflict formed the central and overarching theme of the panel. Although the two perspectives were not explicitly compared, elements of each came up throughout the discussion. Participants discussed several “turning” and “tipping” points throughout cyber history as potential points of discontinuity. These tipping points also offer potential qualitative shifts and likely differ across countries/regions, making periodization complex and inherently spatially bounded. Complicating matters further, cyber events (e.g., the Morris Worm, Stuxnet, and Operation Orchard) and non-cyber events (e.g., the Oklahoma City Bombing, the Asian Financial Crisis, and the November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks) alike were identified as potential roots of decisive change in this field.<sup>5</sup> But beyond the many spatial and temporal discontinuities identified were signs of remarkable continuity in the nature of cyber conflict, including an ever-evolving relationship between “cyber” and “info” warfare.

## I. Conceptual History

QUESTION(S):	GAP(S):
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How has our perception of cyber-related concepts changed?</li> <li>How does conceptual ambiguity affect governance?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The relationship between the prefix “cyber” and other terms (e.g., “info,” “computer,” etc.).</li> </ul>

The workshop session started with a discussion on the historical semantics of cyber-related terms. The term “cyberspace” has long been attributed to William Gibson, who first used it in the 1982 short story “Burning Chrome” and again in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer*.<sup>6</sup> However, it has now been traced back to an earlier etymology. An article in a Norwegian art magazine suggests the term may have first appeared, without gaining currency, in a painting collage produced by Susanne Ussing and Carsten Hof between 1968–1970.<sup>7</sup> John Perry Barlow is credited with introducing “cyberspace” to political discourse in 1996.<sup>8</sup>

Regardless of its origins, the term has been interpreted in numerous ways and embodied a variety of meanings over the years. In assessing the history of cyber-related concepts,<sup>9</sup> panelists identified two primary questions:

- How has our understanding of cyber-related concepts changed?
- How does conceptual ambiguity affect governance?

Following the discussion, panelists made the key observation that it is only possible to understand the nature of cyberspace by assessing its pre-history. They referenced a brief history by several chief architects of the Internet on the technical foundation of the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET).<sup>10</sup> This account emphasizes the decentralized, trust-based nature of the project. The panelists also reiterated a point raised in 2016, that the prefix “cyber” is still often conflated with other terms, such as “info,” “computer,” or “the Internet.” This ongoing conflation and ambiguity of terms hinders policy efforts to establish “rules of the road.”

One participant noted the importance of understanding how “cyber” became a military domain, guiding our organizational and strategic thinking. In 2011, the U.S. military forces officially expanded the traditional

domains of warfare—air, sea, land, and space—to include cyber.<sup>11</sup> A number of countries have subsequently adopted a similar approach, and in 2016 NATO also officially declared cyberspace a warfare domain.<sup>12</sup> Both the historical origins and the implications of conceptualizing cyberspace in this manner remain ill understood.

Finally, participants noted that the conceptualization of cyberspace and its relevant terminology varies across countries. For example, a report from the East-West Institute states, “Unlike Americans, Russians saw cybersecurity as an inextricable part of a larger discussion on information security.”<sup>13</sup> Regional differences are also evident in the interpretation of “cyber sovereignty,” which describes a government’s goal of exercising control over cyber activities within its own borders.<sup>14</sup>

## II. History of Cyber Conflict Discourse

QUESTION(S):	GAP(S):
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How has the discourse surrounding cyber conflict (and the cyber threat) developed over time?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>U.S.-centric.</li> <li>Limited group of actors analyzed.</li> </ul>

The study of discourse and narratives is becoming increasingly important to the field of conflict resolution. Scholars have been analyzing the cyber security discourse since the early 2000s.<sup>15</sup> Myriam Dunn Cavelty makes a compelling and comprehensive argument that cyber threats have been inflated by numerous policymakers.<sup>16</sup> Limiting his scope to the United States, Ralf Bendrath reaches a similar conclusion: “there is no link at all between the cyber threat perception and the real world.”<sup>17</sup> Although the field has evolved around the literature on securitization, scholars have also addressed the consequences of cyber threat inflation. Thomas Rid and Robert M. Lee contend that “cyber-angst” is damaging and self-serving and that a more nuanced debate is needed.<sup>18</sup>

Workshop participants addressed a key gap in the current academic discussion on cyber discourse: the lack of scholarship into how cyber threat assessment and general threat assessment affect each other. They high-

lighted the November 2015 Paris attacks as a potentially interesting case warranting analysis. Historically, the primary focus of cyber conflict has centered on attacks originating in Russia and China. The 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, while not cyber conflict, catapulted “cyber terrorism” back into focus as a key threat to the general public.

In addition, participants noted that the ongoing discussion of the nature of cyber conflict—often post-cyber incident—takes place in a number of different forums. They pointed out that many excellent insights on recent cyber activity have appeared on Twitter instead of in the mainstream media. The research community needs to think carefully about how best to capture these views to ensure that they will not be lost to reports published in future case studies.

Finally, participants noted that the tendency to attach the prefix “cyber” to other terms, though ongoing, may slow or cease in the future. As one participant observed, we no longer talk about the “digital economy”—it’s just the “economy.” “Cyber warfare” may someday mirror this trend; “cyber” will come to seem inherent to, and implicit in, “warfare.”

## III. Eras in Cyber Conflict History

QUESTION(S):	GAP(S):
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How can we divide cyber conflict history into eras?</li> <li>Which incidents or moments serve as transition points between these eras?</li> <li>How did institutions develop around cyber conflict in the early era?</li> <li>How has the balance changed between military operations and intelligence as a matter of doctrine, organization, and practice?</li> <li>How has cyber conflict history already been divided into “eras”?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What unique technical and political attributes are linked to these eras?</li> <li>How do different levels of granularity overlay when we outline the history of cyber conflict?</li> </ul>

The third topic on the agenda was “Eras in Cyber Conflict History,” with “eras” viewed as frameworks that we impose over events to make sense of them. In his “pre-history” of cyber security, Michael Warner argues that the U.S. government’s insights can be categorized into four phases:

- Computers can spill sensitive data and must be guarded (1960s)
- Computers can be attacked, and data can be stolen (1970s)
- We can build computer attacks into military arsenals (1980s and 1990s)
- Others might do the same to us — and perhaps already have (1990s)<sup>19</sup>

Healey, by contrast, identifies three phases of cyber conflict history: realization (1980s), takeoff (1990s–), and militarization (2003–).<sup>20</sup> Awareness of the potential of cyber conflict grew through various events in the 1980s and 1990s, including the Morris Worm (1988), the Wank Worm (1989), the Cuckoo's Egg (1989), Michelangelo (1992), Eligible Receiver (1997), and Solar Sunrise (1998). Post-2000, several events, including the Code Red Worm (2001), the SQL Slammer Worm (2003), JSF espionage (2009), and Stuxnet (2010), increased the sense that targeted cyber activity would only intensify.<sup>21</sup>

Workshop participants echoed two points from earlier cyber history discussions: first, that non-cyber events have, at times, been instrumental in shaping cyber policy. For example, the murder of 168 and injuring of hundreds more in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing likely impacted the United States’ formal response to cyber threats. Following the attack, the Clinton administration formed the President's Commission on Critical Infrastructure Protection, which released a report stressing the need to implement new measures around cyber security.<sup>22</sup> Second, that periodization differs significantly across regions. For example, as was noted, Chinese experts published several articles in the mid-1990s on the United States’ growing interest in information warfare.<sup>23</sup> The Chinese also likely learned important lessons from Operation Orchard, Israel’s 2007 use of electronic warfare to neutralize Syrian radar systems, facilitating an airstrike on a suspected nuclear reactor.

In the Middle East, rapid change occurred from 2009–2012, when Stuxnet was revealed and popular uprisings partially fueled by online mobilization hit multiple autocratic regimes. The events of the Arab Spring, though often forgotten, are arguably as relevant as Stuxnet to the course of cyber policy in this region. To quell protests, governments across the Arab world severely tightened Internet controls, arrested bloggers, stole passwords for social media accounts, and in several countries (Egypt, Libya, and Syria), even attempted to shut down the Internet completely. The perspective of many autocratic regimes in the region was that the cyber threat was coming from multiple vectors simultaneously.<sup>24</sup>

While these examples of periodization in China and the Middle East are illuminating, participants noted that a broad overview of which events were essential for different countries or regions is still missing.

## IV. Organizational History

QUESTION(S):	GAP(S):
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How have legislation, rules, and doctrines evolved to address cyber threats?</li> <li>• How have major cyber incidents impacted organizational policies or structures?</li> <li>• Have doctrinal and organizational developments abroad been secondary or primary factors for domestic organizational change?</li> <li>• How have organizations adopted and incorporated offensive cyber capabilities?</li> <li>• How can non-state actors help to establish and cascade cyber norms?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weighted toward institutions that have either defended or threatened the United States.</li> <li>• The impact and evolution of non-governmental organizations is underexplored.</li> <li>• Interstate cooperation (particularly on offensive).</li> </ul>

Scholarly discussion of organizational responses to cyber conflict has taken place on several levels. Most research has focused on the relationship *between* the

public and private sectors in *defending* cyberspace. The specific conditions under which information should be shared and the extent to which non-voluntary standards should guide the public-private relationship form a central consideration within organizational responses.<sup>25</sup>

Workshop participants identified the high level of secrecy as a barrier to discussion about how the links *within* government relate to the conduct of *offensive* operations.<sup>26</sup> Future research is necessary on the relationship between offensive intelligence operations and offensive military operations—or what the U.S. military calls Computer Network Exploitation (CNE) and Computer Network Attack (CNA).

Another often-overlooked area of study within the field is the role of informal “trust networks.” Milton Mueller writes, “there is a strong and persistent tension between state sovereignty, which is territorially bounded, and the nonterritorial space for social interaction created by networked computers.”<sup>27</sup> This tension, and the non-nation-centered arrangements that may follow from it, deserve further analysis.

From an organizational perspective, the intertwining of cyber warfare and information warfare has been critical to some governments while an anathema to others. Following the DNC hack, many experts have prioritized a reorientation toward countering information operations. As one participant observed, this focus is nothing new: “In the United States, there was a debate about it 20 years ago. Interestingly, the term ‘cyber’ was purposefully separate to make sure it becomes ‘something’ on its own; it showed that it went beyond psychological warfare. Yet, some now go down this road, which back then was seen as a dead end.” The voluminous documentation on information warfare following the Kosovo War and the liberation of Kuwait in the 1990s supports this point, as does the outlining of the elements underlying “information warfare” in a 1976 paper by Boeing engineer Thomas P. Rona.

Finally, there remain open questions about how cyber conflict relates to issues of global order. Despite ongoing initiatives from the Global Commission on Cyberspace, it is unclear how we can embed cyber regimes into broader global stability. Note that even though the current reading lists include references on “cyber norms,” several participants argued that it would be better to address that issue separately.

## V. Operational and Strategic History

QUESTION(S):	GAP(S):
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How have operators detected, identified, responded to, and recovered from major cyber incidents?</li> <li>▪ Can current cyber defenders or policymakers draw any lessons from past operational incidents?</li> <li>▪ Is there fundamental continuity or discontinuity in cyber operations?</li> <li>▪ Which early works helped to shape strategic thinking on cyber conflict?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Still lacking comprehensive case studies.</li> <li>▪ Analysis of incidents using historical datasets is still limited to a few scholars.</li> <li>▪ There is no clear sense of how pre-cyber operations link to current-day cyber activity.</li> </ul>

There are many open questions when it comes to operational and strategic cyber history. Unfortunately, the discussion was cut short due to time limitations.

### Concluding Remarks

As the panel discussion emphasized, cyber history is simultaneously characterized by “continuous change” as well as “turning points.” While time constraints prevented participants from providing a comprehensive overview of the field, the identified gaps establish a natural starting point for discussion at the next SOTF. At the next workshop, it may be especially worthwhile to focus on the operational and strategic history of cyber conflict. This could include an overview of known cases that have received insufficient attention.

## Conceptual History: Meaning of Cyber(space)

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## History of Cyber Conflict Discourse

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## Eras in Cyber Conflict History

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## End Notes

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1. The authors would like to thank Aaron Brantly and Karl Grindal for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this report.
2. Thomas Rid, "How Russia Pulled Off the Biggest Election Hack in U.S. History," *Esquire*, (20 October 2016), retrieved from: [www.esquire.com/news-politics/a49791/russian-dnc-emails-hacked/](http://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a49791/russian-dnc-emails-hacked/)
3. As one participant noted, "Federal historians are a dying breed—they get cannibalized before something else [which directly impacts mission execution]."
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18. Robert M. Lee and Thomas Rid, “OMG CYBER! Thirteen Reasons why Hype Makes for Bad Policy,” *The RUSI Journal*, 159:5 (2014): 4–12
19. Michael Warner, “Cybersecurity: A Pre-history,” *Intelligence and National Security*, 27:5 (2012): 781–799
20. Jason Healey (ed.), *A Fierce Domain: Conflict in Cyberspace, 1986 to 2012*, (Vienna, VA: Cyber Conflict Studies Association, 2013)
21. One participant observed that a lot of low-hanging fruit remains when it comes to data gathering and analysis. There is still much more to be done in terms of coding these events.
22. President’s Commission on Critical Infrastructure Protection, “Critical Foundations: Protecting America’s Infrastructures,” (13 October 1997), retrieved from: [www.fas.org/sgp/library/pccip.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sgp/library/pccip.pdf)
23. Warner, “Cybersecurity: A Pre-history”
24. It was noted that hybrid warfare, critical infrastructure attacks, and surveillance characterized this regional perspective.
25. Sue Eckert, “Protecting Critical Infrastructure: The Role of the Private Sector,” University of Pittsburg, 2006, available at: [www.ridgway.pitt.edu/Portals/1/pdfs/Publications/Eckert.pdf](http://www.ridgway.pitt.edu/Portals/1/pdfs/Publications/Eckert.pdf); Kenneth Neil Cukier, Viktor Mayer-Schoenberger, and Lewis M. Branscomb, “Ensuring (and Insuring?) Critical Information Infrastructure Protection,” Working Paper, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 11 October 2005
26. Max Smeets, “Organisational Integration of Offensive Cyber Capabilities: A Primer on the Benefits and Risks.” In H. Rõigas, R. Jakschis, L. Lindström, and T. Minárik (eds.), *Defending the Core*, 9th International Conference on Cyber Conflict, (Tallinn: NATO CCD COE Publications, 2017). The workshop participants did not discuss in any detail the nature of these relationships, whether that interpersonal, agency, or operational.
27. Milton F. Mueller, *Network and States: The Global Politics of Internet Governance*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2010), p. 1

The Cyber Conflict Studies Association (CCSA) promotes and leads international intellectual development efforts to advance the field of cyber conflict research. These activities include workshops that bring together professionals from industry, academia and government to discuss strategic issues surrounding cyber conflict and the publication of insightful research articles and position papers and books. CCSA also plays an important role in our national cyber-readiness strategy, serving as a resource for national security decision-makers and helping to frame and promote national cyber conflict policy. CCSA brings together the best and the brightest individuals in the field of cyber conflict study to further the goals of national security and the field of cyber.

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