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Deception Declassified: The Social Organisation of Cover Storying in a Secret Intelligence Operation

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Abstract

This article asks why and how governments keep secrets from publics, journalists and politicians using the strategy of 'cover storying'. To develop a theory of cover storying, insights are drawn from political sociologies of state secrecy and from recent sociological examinations of secrecy and deception in organisations. This theory is illustrated by analysing Cobra Mist, a secretive and deceptive Anglo-American Cold War intelligence operation. Examining recently declassified documents, this article develops a framework for the analysis of five interrelated narrative conditions that shape social processes of cover storying: correspondence; plausibility; accountability; constraint; and durability. In conclusion this article reflects on the broader implications of this analysis for contemporary state and organisational theories and understandings of secrecy.

Introduction

Secrecy and deception are ubiquitous features of the social world. Yet, while much is known about secrecy and deception between individuals at the micro-interactive level, a major focus in psychology, much less is known about how secrecy and deception operate at the organisational level. Building on recent attempts to fill this gap in sociological literature (Bail, 2015; Baker and Faulkner, 1993; Best and Walters, 2013; Costas and Grey, 2014; Galison, 2010; Gibson, 2014; Horn, 2011; Ku, 1998; Masco, 2002; Paglen, 2010; Piché, 2012; Taussig, 1999; Walby and Anaïs, 2012), this article asks why and how state actors keep secrets from lay publics, journalists and politicians using the strategy of 'cover storying'. Since Simmel (1906), sociologists have taken little interest in theorising the dynamics of secrecy and deception in government and organisations.

This article sketches the beginnings of a sociological theory of cover storying aimed at understanding why and how state actors use false and deceptive narratives to conceal organisational secrets. Cover storying is a form of 'anti-epistemology': '[e]pistemology asks how knowledge can be uncovered and secured. Antiepistemology asks how knowledge can be covered and obscured' (Galison, 2004: 237). To outline a theory of cover storying, insight is drawn from political sociologies of state secrecy and from recent sociological examinations of secrecy and deception in organisations. To narrow the scope of the analysis, this article focuses

on five interrelated narrative conditions that shape the inside ‘deception work’ of organisational officials involved in the scripting, rehearsing, publicisation and maintenance of deceptive cover stories. These are: correspondence; plausibility; accountability; constraint; and durability. It is intended for these five narrative conditions to serve as a useful typology for orienting future sociological investigations into organisational practices of cover storying and secrecy and deception more broadly. Given the focus on narrative conditions, the analysis of Cobra Mist deals more with questions of how than questions of why, although both are necessary for a fuller theoretical understanding of secretive and deceptive organisational practices. One cannot understand why organisations use cover stories without first having some sense of how cover storying is enacted in practice. Through a reflection on these five narrative conditions, the concluding section of the article points to two major avenues for future research into questions of why deceptive cover storying practices are used by organisational officials.

This framework is then illustrated by analysing Cobra Mist, an elusive Anglo-American radar intelligence station built in the UK in the late 1960s and targeted at Soviet military capabilities. Cobra Mist was distinctive for its use of cover storying as a deceptive strategy to inhibit publics from learning about the true nature of its activities. By cover storying Cobra Mist behind the guise of ‘radio research’, Cobra Mist officials reconfigured their front and backstage institutional practices in ways that the relational sociological study of organisational secrecy and deception makes intelligible. The concluding section reflects on the broader implications of this analysis for contemporary state and organisational theories and understandings of secrecy. A call is made for sociologists to take greater advantage of the ongoing declassification of Cold War texts in public archives. Such texts, it is argued, should not only be of interest to historical sociologists, but to those seeking to better understand the politics of state secrecy and deception today.

Towards a Sociological Theory of Cover Storying

Political sociologies of secrecy call our attention to the constitutive role of secrecy and deception in the exercise of state institutional power (Abrams, 1988; Bail, 2015; Lukes, 1974). Through claims to official secrecy, government agents regularly invoke as a central mechanism of institutional power the right ‘to withhold information, deny observation and dictate the terms of knowledge’ (Abrams, 1988: 62). Bail (2015) and Lukes (1974) examine the central and at times paradoxical workings of secrecy in government policy making. In general, such deception work prevents outsiders ‘from seeing more clearly the almost inevitable disparity between the idealised representation of the state in such terms and the practices authorised in the name of the state’ (Hay, 2014: 468). Cover storying is one mechanism used by state actors to inhibit publics from learning the true nature of their plans, intentions and activities.

Why do states use cover stories? Chambers (2004) argues that, under specific circumstances, secrecy has the potential to improve the quality of insider debate and decision making. One way secrecy can do this is by affording state actors the confidence to speak more freely and openly about their ideas without having to worry about each one going public, where they can become politicised, decontextualised and reinterpreted. Mearsheimer (2011) examines examples where government actors engaged in cover storying and other modes of political lying for reasons they believed were in the best interests of the public. In his theory of bureaucracy, Weber (1946: 233) observes that secrecy is tantamount to acquiring inter-organisational advantage as it allows

bureaucratic organisations to keep certain knowledge and motivations secret thereby increasing the relative 'superiority of its position'. Trade secrets in the business world fit this category of strategic advantage, as do many of the secrets kept by military and intelligence agencies during wartime and other militaristic scenarios.

In some ways, the ExComm meetings involving Kennedy and his top administrators in the midst of the Cuban Missile Crisis showed evidence for all three of these rationales for state secrecy. The ExComm was also a case in which state actors contemplated the strategy of cover storying. In the event that it was necessary, McGeorge Bundy, then special assistant to Kennedy for national security affairs, suggested cover storying the discussions behind the guise of 'intensive budget review sessions' (Gibson, 2012: 57). First, as Gibson (2012) argues, Kennedy and his top administrators strategised a response to the Cuban Missile Crisis through a process of 'foretalk' in an attempt to identify the best strategic course of action when responding to the crisis. Foretalk in the context of ExComm involved imagining possible futures based on hypothetical diplomatic and military responses to the missiles in Cuba. One could argue that secrecy allowed Kennedy and his top officials the freedom to more effectively engage in foretalk as they would not have to worry about their statements going public and becoming politicised. Second, it is conceivable that making the ExComm discussions public may not have actually been in the public's best interests, who at the time of one of the most potentially devastating global crises would have been even more unsettled by the uncertainty of Kennedy and his top officials (see Mearsheimer, 2011: 96–97 on the 'noble lie'). Kennedy knew that the decision was unlikely to be accepted by US publics, hence keeping it secret, but in the end it proved an effective way of defusing the conflict. Finally, from a military strategic standpoint, one could argue the ExComm meetings had to be kept secret from foreign political leaders, most notably Castro and Khrushchev, who in the event of a surprise attack from the USA would need to be kept in the dark.

There are other conceivable reasons for states to engage in cover storying, which can be more dubious. One reason is to conceal the use of questionable or illegal practices that, if publicly disclosed, could result in scandal, criminal proceedings, insurance payouts, fines, loss of legitimacy, public protest or organisational reform. Vaughan's (1985) study of the Ohio Revco case evinces a clear instance in which secrecy was motivated by the desire to avoid many of these negative repercussions at the organisational level. Another reason is to avoid political embarrassment, which can work against an office in government by undermining public trust, reputation and legitimacy. For example, if a public agency does not think it will succeed in meeting certain goals, it may choose to justify its goals deceptively in terms that can be more easily accounted for in the event of failure. Cover storying can also be motivated by the desire for ease and efficacy in public relations. Sometimes it is simply easier to lie than to tell the truth. As Arendt (2001: 6) observes, lying also has the great advantage of controlling to an extent an audience's reaction by saying what they want to hear. Finally, organisational practices of secrecy and cover storying are not always consciously and rationally calculated. Cover storying may be habitual, particularly in agencies that are accustomed to deceiving publics rather than being truthful. Many military and intelligence programmes are not secretive and deceptive by necessity, but out of habit. Under such circumstances, secrecy becomes part of a taken for granted ethos or way of thinking, relating and decision making in organisations. One way secrecy and deception become habitual in organisations is by becoming inextricably entwined

with an insider's identity and culture of trust and expertise (see, for example, Ellsberg, 2010: 774 for first-hand experience).

Equally important to why is the question of how cover storying is planned, achieved and (usually) failed in practice. While there are a number of registers of activity involved in cover storying, this article hones in on the creation, dissemination and maintenance of the deceptive cover narrative. Cover storying is planned in a two-part process of scripting and rehearsing, broadly defined as the secret art of designing, drafting and envisaging a cover narrative for public consumption. Scripting an effective cover narrative involves routine meetings, formal and informal conversations and reports, written and disseminated backstage, aimed at addressing the question of how best to go public and through what narrative and 'means of notification' (Ryan, 2006). Scripts must also be carefully rehearsed, as an appropriate cover narrative is one that passes the litmus test of inside actors' efforts to consciously envisage an audience's reactions. In rehearsal, deceptive actors push the limits of their imaginations, experiences and knowledge of the social world to weigh out the strength of one cover story over another, and to play out possible scenarios in going forward with them.

The efficacy of a deceptive cover narrative hinges upon five major 'narrative conditions' which can be reconstructed and analysed empirically. The goal of these conditions is to help orient social researchers to internal organisational processes of cover storying, with the larger aim of informing future comparative work. As scholarly concepts, their purpose is to render practices of cover storying intelligible to sociological analysis and its theories and different modes of criticism. These are: (1) correspondence, how well the script corresponds to the visible activities and materiality of the programme; (2) plausibility, whether the cover narrative can convince multiple audiences; (3) accountability, the extent to which an exposed cover narrative can be publicly justified and defended; (4) constraint, the degree to which the cover story constrains the front and backstage practices of inside actors; and (5) durability, how well a cover narrative withstands leaks, slip-ups and political pressure. Each of these conditions is shaped by the historical period, geography, regime type and institution doing the cover storying. In some regime types, these conditions may not apply (e.g. certain totalitarian regimes). These conditions may or may not be taken into account by deceptive actors when scripting and rehearsing a cover narrative. In *Cobra Mist*, state actors only recognised the constraining effects of the chosen cover story after it had been publicised.

The success of cover storying is always finite and conditional, which is what makes it possible to study cover storying in the first place. Like scandals and controversies that result in leak (Best and Walters, 2013; Ku, 1998), the congenital failures of cover storying in government are what make it visible. Gibson (2014) conceptualises this as the 'entropic' nature of information in organisations: clandestine information will always at some point break free from its institutional confines and dissipate in a form that is no longer secret (see also Fenster, 2014). Strategic and accidental leaks are commonplace in government, to the point where even the most extreme of totalitarian regimes cannot maintain total control over the backstage (Bail, 2015: 100).

Investigative journalists play a formative role in the exposure of organisational secrecy and deception (Ku, 1998; Rosanvallon, 2008; Thompson, 2000). Using freedom of information laws and other means of investigative digging, many journalists today have built reputable careers

around the exposure of government secrets. Other ways that cover stories may become visible to outsiders are through whistleblowers, the strategic and accidental leaks of insiders or the expiry of classification stamps. In the UK, classified documents are declassified either through requests made under the Freedom of Information Act (passed in 2000), in which citizens request access to certain government records, or are automatically made publicly available in the National Archives after 30 years, known as the ‘30-year rule’. With Cobra Mist, it was through a combination of journalistic exposure, strategic/accidental leaks and declassification through freedom of information requests and the 30-year rule that its use of cover storying became known. The next section analyses Cobra Mist in terms of the five narrative conditions of cover story correspondence, plausibility, accountability, constraint and durability.

Cover Storying in Cobra Mist

Data and Method

To examine narrative conditions of cover storying, this article uses a case study research design. Declassified records and newspaper articles on Cobra Mist were collected from three archives in the UK: the National Archives in Kew, Richmond, Surrey; the British Library archives in London; and the Suffolk Public Records Office in Ipswich, Suffolk. From the National Archives, 3800 pages of declassified records were analysed on Cobra Mist, including technical reports, letters, postmortems, briefing notes, policies and other formerly top secret texts. These records came from a total of 13 different archival references that were declassified between over a 13-year period (1998–2011). From the news section of the British Library archives and on microfiche at the Suffolk Public Records Office, newspaper articles on Cobra Mist were analysed from the Daily Express and East Anglian Daily Times. To analyse these data, a qualitative approach to analysis was used, first openly coding for any material relevant to the themes of secrecy and deception. Once the prominence of cover storying practices was discovered, a smaller subset of the data (all materials mentioning some form of secrecy or deception) was reanalysed, this time coding specifically for social processes of cover storying. The five narrative conditions of correspondence, plausibility, accountability, constraint and durability were developed from this second round of focused coding. A key limitation of this case study is that it does not include analysis of records from archives in the USA, and therefore is limited to the story of Cobra Mist from documents available in the UK. These records pertained mostly to the communications, deliberations and decisions of officials in the Ministry of Defence. The same limitation applies to the analysis of newspaper articles and press releases, which came primarily from UK sources.

Operation Cobra Mist (1967–1973)

Cobra Mist was a top secret Anglo-American radar intelligence operation jointly operated by the US Department of Defense (DoD) and UK Ministry of Defence (MoD). The station was constructed and operated on the easternmost coast of England between 1967 and 1973 during the Cold War. Although short lived, Cobra Mist was a significant development within the wider apparatus of Anglo-American intelligence programmes. Its integral place in the history of Cold War espionage has been noted by several historians (e.g. Aldrich, 2010), yet little remains known

about the operation. Considerably less is known about the operation's use of cover storying as a deceptive organisational strategy.

Like most military intelligence operations of the Cold War era, Cobra Mist's backstage art of cover storying is something which occurred only on a strict 'need to know basis'. Within the MoD, it was the Head of S9(Air) and several Defence Intelligence staff which took the lead on the preparation, maintenance and modification of the chosen cover narrative. Public Relations officials were also involved in the process of cover storying, but it is difficult to know the extent to which they were truly 'in the know'. Public relations officials in Cobra Mist were tasked with drafting and editing press releases, Parliamentary Q&A scripts and other materials, but often based only on the limited disinformation they were provided.

Although a historical case study, the contemporary significance of Cold War operations like Cobra Mist should not be overlooked. On the surface, the time lapse between classification and declassification may appear to restrict the 'transferability' (Tracy, 2010) of historical studies such as this one. As Galison (2010) and Horn (2011) argue, there are veritable differences between political relations of secrecy today and those of the Cold War. On the other hand, it would be remiss to overlook the lasting significance of the Cold War for today's structures of secrecy. As many have observed, it is only thanks to the 'structural legacy of Cold War counterespionage tactics' (Melley, 2012: 13) that national security policies took the form they did today. So although state secrecy may be qualitatively different in the post-9/11 era of national security than it was in the past, understanding the lasting legacy of operations like Cobra Mist in contemporary logics and institutional structures of secrecy remains a crucial part of today's project. This argument is returned to in the Discussion and Conclusion.

Correspondence

Cobra Mist was built in 1967 on Orfordness in Suffolk, UK. The choice of Orfordness, an isolated shingle spit adjacent to the town of Orford and separated by River Alde, was strategic. Among other reasons, Orfordness was advocated as an ideal location for such a station given the relative ease through which secret sites are constructed in already secret regions: '[a]s Orfordness is already closed to the public, its use is unlikely to provoke serious public opposition, though with its aerial antennae the structure will be extensive. A suitable cover story may be necessary' (Ministry of Defence, 1966). Much of the cultural and political work needed to establish the site as secret rather than open was already in place given the site's longstanding history of military use since the First World War (see Heazell, 2011). As far as UK publics were concerned, military experiments had always been a part of Orfordness' history. On the other hand, the spatial proximity of Orfordness to seeing publics meant that the extensive physical infrastructure of the operation would be largely visible. Thus, a 'suitable cover story' was deemed necessary. This was to call the station a 'radio research station' rather than an operational intelligence station.

The main point here is that the materiality of Cobra Mist, whether they explicitly acknowledged it or not, structured DoD and MoD officials' decision to frame the operation as a radio research station rather than something else. Organisational cover narratives are not simply scripted and rehearsed out of thin air on the assumption that any narrative will do; but must be carefully

brainstormed and drafted with reference to the limits presented to them by the real, material world. An image of radio research closely corresponded with the material limits of the site's physical infrastructure without giving away its actual function. Although they did not discuss it explicitly, it is obvious enough that cover storying the operation as, say, a hangar for the Royal Air Force, was not bound to work given the presence of large radio masts visible from the populated shores. Similarly, had Cobra Mist informed publics it was a shipping port rather than a radio research station, matters would have been made unnecessarily difficult. Such a cover narrative would have required an elaborate architecture of docks, boats and so forth, none of which would have been of immediate value to the operation. Not to mention it would have been far too difficult, if not impossible, to sustain for any long period of time. Secrets sites are, in Paglen's (2010: 36) words, 'inescapably spatial'.

Plausibility and Accountability

The idea of a suitable cover story quoted above, pulled from a secret note debriefing the UK Prime Minister, Harold Wilson in 1966, was carried through subsequently in various secret reports, minutes and letters between MoD and DoD officials. With the exception of the Prime Minister's office, UK politicians and government agencies, including most employees of the MoD, were to be fed the same disinformation as everyone else. As one MoD official wrote in April 1968, specifying the content of the chosen cover narrative as one of 'radio research station' rather than operational radar: "a suitable cover story has been necessary. This is that the station will be a radio research station ... The line has been agreed with the US Government. It is literally correct to say that the station will carry out research and that it will not form part of any early warning or AMB [anti-ballistic missile] system, but it is of course expected to prove valuable in supplementing such systems. This, however, cannot be revealed. (Ministry of Defence, 1968a)"

The radio research cover story was made public in Britain on 25 August 1967 in the form of a carefully prepared statement disseminated to the local British press. As the East Anglian Daily Times declared on the front page of its morning paper, headlined 'Orfordness site for radio station': "The Ministry of Defence and the United States Department of Defence have agreed to collaborate in the construction and operation of a radio research station at Orfordness, it was announced yesterday. The station will conduct joint research into long-range propagation of radio signals ... (East Anglian Daily Times, 1967)"

Next to other possibilities, a cover story about radio research was an innocuous choice. While the narrative about radio research constituted a cover story insofar as it concealed crucial details that could not be publicised, the assertion that Cobra Mist was a radio research station was also partly truthful. Research was to be conducted as part of the operation. This was just not the only, nor the primary, purpose of the station.

If one strategy of deception lies in the ability to assemble a convincing yet fictitious narrative about reality, another seemingly less disreputable one – which Cobra Mist officials adopted – is to evade certain elements of the truth through vague descriptions, misplaced emphases and omissions. Shauer and Zeckhauser (2009) have referred to this mode of lying as 'paltering'. As another MoD official commented on the untruthfulness of the cover story: 'I think we should

stick to our present line that the Station at Orfordness is a Research Station, which in any case has the merit of being very largely true!’ (Ministry of Defence, 1968b).

The radio research cover narrative was also highly plausible given its likelihood of reaching a working consensus with publics on the frontstage. For who could effectively resist the public good of research on a matter that is both as practical and safe, if not entirely mundane, as radio? By contrast, over-the-horizon radar, surveillance, early warning, missiles and other familiar Cold War buzzwords were knowingly omitted from MoD and DoD’s frontstage lexicon. Even the Cobra Mist codename was precluded from official discourse. A handful of documented communications between Cobra Mist officials detail the conscious avoidance of such language in the work of scripting and rehearsing their deceptive press releases for public consumption.

Finally, Cobra Mist officials seemed to have been mildly aware of the entropic nature of organisational secrecy. However, the exact extent to which this explicitly informed their choice of radio research as a ‘suitable’ cover narrative is difficult to know. As one MoD official wrote: ‘[s]ooner or later it will be necessary to correct the record so far as Parliament is concerned’ (Ministry of Defence, 1971a). Certainly, an innocuous narrative about radio research, closely corresponding as it did with the truth, was going to be far easier to publicly defend than something more far-fetched and elaborate.

Constraint

Once publicised, the future frontstage performances of organisational actors must in turn be carried out in correspondence with chosen cover narratives. In an MoD report detailing concerns and logistical issues with going forward with operational trials, Cobra Mist officials discussed how the radio research cover narrative constrained what could be reasonably declared frontstage. One of the main concerns of going forward with the trials was the potential interference of the site’s radio frequency output with proximal aircraft, boats and local citizens who had certain brands of pacemakers – although the latter concern was never publicised. As the MoD report put it, “The job of devising material [for a press statement on radio interference] will be complicated by the fact that we have not revealed, and it is not the intention to reveal, the true purpose of Cobra Mist. For public presentation it is merely ‘a radio research station’ which will conduct ‘joint (Anglo-American) research into problems of long-range propagation of radio signals.’ It will thus be difficult to advance strong defence reasons for persuading the public to accept such nuisance and restrictions as the station causes. (Ministry of Defence, 1971b)”

MoD officials faced a similar realisation when contemplating whether it would be feasible to accept the site as a gift from the DoD after terminating its participation in the programme in 1973. Either both agencies pulled out of the operation, or DoD officials would withdraw their participation giving ‘the existing installation free of charge to the UK to operate as it wishes, with a promise of US support in the provision of spare parts, or repayment’ (Ministry of Defence, 1973a). MoD officials rejected the DoD’s offer on the assumption that it was a deceptive strategy ‘designed to eliminate the heavy cost to the US of clearing the site, to which it believes itself committed’ (Ministry of Defence, 1973a). MoD actors also considered the future cover narrative plausibility (or lack thereof) that would come with the gifting of the site. As the MoD reasoned, “On the other hand, if the UK took over COBRA MIST as a solely national

project, it would be confronted with the necessity for publicly explaining the development. It would probably be difficult to claim that it was necessary to retain the station unilaterally in operation for the purposes of radio research, when other similar establishments are known to exist; and it would probably be necessary to acknowledge – as Chapman Pincher amongst others has for sometime claimed – that it was engaged in work connected with OTHR [over-the-horizon radar]. The reasons for the UK pressing ahead with this in the face of a US withdrawal would not be easy to defend. (Ministry of Defence, 1973a)"

In the MoD's view, the deceptive image of Cobra Mist as a benign radio research station did not allow it to take over the programme as a national venture in the absence of US participation. As the report concludes, '[i]t is out of the question for the UK to take over and run COBRA MIST alone, and therefore the UK should not accept any US offer of a gift of the existing installation' (Ministry of Defence, 1973a).

Durability

The radio research cover narrative was fragile, but also flexible. In 1971, a series of leaks were published in the American journal *Aviation Week & Space Technology*. In assessing the potential damage of the leaks, political embarrassment was cited as a central concern: '[the article] gives serious political embarrassment since both in parliament and in the press we have taken the line that Cobra Mist [sic] role is connected with experimental radio propagation' (Ministry of Defence, 1971b). MoD officials immediately accused the DoD for the leak, alleging they had failed to remove secret information from published testimony before Congress. In response, DoD authorities denied all backstage allegations of information mishandling, claiming they had deleted the information from published testimony, and that in any case the article 'was not based on revelation of wholly sound factual information' (Ministry of Defence, 1971c). MoD officials, however, 'found this explanation difficult to accept' (Ministry of Defence, 1971a).

Anticipating a backlash, an MoD postmortem advised that the cover story may need to be 'modified' pending the input of DoD officials (Ministry of Defence, 1971d). To modify the cover story, MoD officials considered the possibility of carrying out what they called an 'inspired' Parliamentary Q&A. The plan was to handpick an MP whose interest in Cobra Mist would appear natural rather than provoked, who could ask 'pre-scripted' and rehearsed questions: "there is the separate question whether, in view of the information now made public by the Americans, Ministers should seek an opportunity of giving Parliament further information about the COBRA MIST project ... This could most appropriately be done by means of an inspired Parliamentary Question by the local MP – Sir Harwood Harrison – and a written answer in the House. As the local MP for Orfordness it would be quite natural for Sir Harwood Harrison to show a continuing interest in the facility by asking for a periodic progress report on its activities. (Ministry of Defence, 1971a)"

The objective of the Parliamentary Q&A was to offer just enough information to serve as a 'bridge' between the cover narrative and eventual exposure, while avoiding disclosing the true nature of the operation. The inspired Q&A was to serve "as a 'bridge' between the position hitherto taken that the role of the station was to conduct research into long-range radio propagation and the situation which could develop in due course if the trials planned for 1972 are

successful and it is consequently decided to develop the facility in a fully operational OTHR role. (Ministry of Defence, 1971a)"

Staging talk led MoD officials to the conclusion that without any statement issued frontstage, they could be pressed further and eventually put into a situation where they would have less control. By initiating a Parliamentary Q&A, they could solidify a concrete response, which would serve as an eventual bridge, and thus avoid any future disruptions from publics, journalists and politicians on the matter: "I think it is finely balanced whether to put it down or let the matter sleep, but I am inclined to the former course because [Daily Express columnist] Chapman Pincher has raised this problem in the past and spoken to the office about it recently, so it is only a matter of time before he raises it again. It would therefore only be wise to put down this PQ to get in the innocuous answer now which could enable one to establish a position so that one need say nothing further when Pincher brought the subject up again; while if nothing had been set down one might be forced into a more positive position in order to reply to some future statement of his. (Ministry of Defence, 1971a)"

The decision to modify the cover story through a staged Parliamentary Q&A was eventually put on hold, as Cobra Mist officials were first waiting to see whether the matter was taken up by journalists in the UK. As an MoD official reflected a year-and-a-half later: "There was some discussion in the Department of whether to confirm the 'Aviation Week' story by means of an arranged PQ, but press interest fell away and the report was neither confirmed nor denied. Thus the cover story remains formally extant. (Ministry of Defence, 1973b)"

Durability was also a contested matter and source of conflict between MoD and DoD officials. Over time the DoD grew increasingly frustrated with the MoD's commitment to cover storying. Some time in 1971, authorities from DoD headquarters directed a letter to MoD officials seeking their approval to amend classification policy. The memo counselled MoD staff that there was no longer a need for strict classification procedures given much of the information protected was already publicly available in the USA and the UK due to unwanted leaks. The DoD's reasoning "being that the exposure by the press, primarily in the UK and the fact that the site is now revealing all of its physical and electronic characteristics, allows any interested, intelligent person to determine the nature of the system and the relationships that exist between the involved organisations. (Department of Defense, 1971)"

MoD officials disagreed with the DoD's position. While the longer-term plan was to use a suitable cover story that was largely truthful, and which could be eventually used to bridge the programme into a state of increased openness, now was not the time. In the event that the operation failed, as MoD officials reasoned, the cover story would serve as a means to avoid political embarrassment, a concern that was presumably less relevant to government actors in the USA given the location of the operation in a national jurisdiction removed from its own. As the MoD wrote in response to the DoD's request: "From the present UK point of view, the degree of classification accorded to the project is very much inter-related with the published cover story, and recent press releases associated with the initiation of activity at the site. The initial cover story, referring to joint research into problems of long-range propagation of radio signals, was designed to protect the real nature of the COBRA MIST project. This story has been maintained consistently in spite of persistent probing in Parliament, and by the Press. Our attitude has been

that the cover story is true, as far as it goes, and could be further developed at an appropriate phase of the trials programme, assuming that the project proves successful. Any sudden change in cover story at the present juncture, with public awareness that trials are in a very initial stage, could create an embarrassing situation for the responsible Ministers. This would be further aggravated at a later stage should the project not prove sufficiently successful to continue. (Ministry of Defence, 1971d)"

And on these grounds the MoD stuck with the cover story all the way into the site's closure in June 1973. At that point, with the participation of the DoD, Cobra Mist officials simply claimed in a press release that the 'radio research' had been completed, and that the station was no longer needed by either agency.

Discussion and Conclusion

Using Cobra Mist as a case study, this article has examined five narrative conditions that shape the state's use of cover storying as a secretive and deceptive strategy. An empirical analysis of cover storying requires close attention to the narrative conditions that structure the work and reasoning of state and organisational actors as they prepare to deceive using a cover story. The purpose of this article has been to make visible some of this deception work. Like most organisational strategies, cover storying is the product of intensive planning, brainstorming, strategising and manoeuvring backstage. Cover storying is also a story of congenital failure. With time, the entropic nature of organisations ensures that leaks will inevitably occur forcing actors on the inside to either change strategies or innovate new ways of prolonging their secrecy. At the very least, it is hoped that this analysis can serve as impetus and guiding framework for future sociological research on secrecy and deception.

To date, secrecy and deception in sociology have not received the analytical attention they deserve. In favour of phenomena that are more readily accessible, sociologists have 'turned away from society's darker regions in order to search for what-ever may be conveniently discovered under the light' (Gibson, 2014: 303). Why? One plausible explanation concerns the limited means through which studies of secrecy and deception must be carried out. Secretive and deceptive state programmes and organisational initiatives do not easily submit to the wills of ethnographic observers, qualitative interviewers and surveyors whose research validity is largely contingent upon the openness and sincerity of participants. When 'studying up' (Gusterson, 1997), sociologists are faced with a whole series of predicaments that challenge their basic assumptions about the nature of quality research. Even when turning to the archive, as this article has, secrecy and deception continue to pose problems for social inquiry. The problem was aptly summarised by British historian of the Cold War, Aldrich (2003: 6): "Nowhere else is the researcher confronted with evidence precisely managed by their subject ... Historians [of secrecy] are what they eat and the convenient but unwholesome diet of processed food on offer in national archives has resulted in a flabby historical posture."

The act of declassification is highly politicised and mediated by a whole series of deceptive practices that can make it as much an extension of secret programmes as it is a partial window into their reality. Yet despite these methodological challenges, recent contributions have demonstrated that sociologists can make useful interventions into matters of state and

organisational secrecy and deception (e.g. Bail, 2015; Baker and Faulkner, 1993; Costas and Grey, 2014; Gibson, 2014; Ku, 1998).

Based on the declassified information available on Cobra Mist, this article has analysed five narrative conditions that shaped and informed the use of cover storying as a secretive and deceptive strategy. These findings have broader implications for contemporary social theories of the state and organisations. First, the study of Cobra Mist highlights longstanding concerns in sociology about the institutional role of secrecy and deception in bureaucracies. In one of his most well-read works in the discipline, Weber (1946) famously argued that secrecy was not simply an added characteristic of certain organisations, but a constitutive element of bureaucratic hierarchies, chains of command and claims to expertise. Reviewing research on the ‘dark side’ of organisations, Vaughan (1999: 277) has termed such aspects of bureaucracy ‘structural secrecy’. However, both the broader and more micro-interactive effects of structural secrecy in bureaucratic organisations remain poorly understood.

Through Cobra Mist, this article revealed bureaucratic secrecy effects in the finding that secrecy and deception not only operated as official strategies for military officials, but served to mediate bureaucratic communicative processes inside and outside of the operation. These findings have implications for internal understandings of bureaucracy and its relation to the public sphere. Internally, the use of secrecy and deception shaped deliberations and decision making in ways analogous to the ExComm meetings. With few exceptions, such internal effects of secrecy have not yet been sufficiently studied and conceptualised (e.g. Chambers, 2004; Gibson, 2012). Outside of Cobra Mist, cover storying operated to dupe attentive publics who trusted its deceptive communications at face value. Such public trust is evidence of a further secrecy effect at the level of bureaucratic legitimacy: underlying MoD appeals to public trust was the longstanding assumption that the information military officials had access to, as well as their plans, intentions and daily routines, could not be reasonably disclosed for reasons of state security. The examination of declassified records on Cobra Mist recasts this assumption in a dubious light. There seemed to be little to no concern for national security evident in the deception work of Cobra Mist officials. Among those that questioned the use of deception in Cobra Mist, as Chapman Pincher did, a resulting culture of distrust, criticism and speculation emerged that gave rise to many conspiracy theories (see Heazell, 2011). Since Weber, theories of bureaucracy have not sufficiently equipped sociologists to grapple with such effects of organisational secrecy and deception. A more refined analytical framework for social research on bureaucratic secrecy is needed. Such a framework must take into account both the larger and more micro-interactive internal and external effects of structural secrecy on the practices and routines of insiders and on diverse publics.

A second broader implication concerns the question of why states and organisations conspire to deceive, particularly if they know their attempts to do so will eventually fail (see Fenster, 2014; Gibson, 2014). In Cobra Mist, state officials seem to have been moderately aware that their use of cover storying was likely to be one day exposed. Efforts were made by Cobra Mist actors to script a cover story that would run less risk of scandal and controversy when revealed. What was perhaps most surprising about the use of cover storying in Cobra Mist was that – at least in public archives – there was very little evidence for keeping the operation secret apart from scant references to the avoidance of political embarrassment. Cobra Mist officials only intended to

divulge the true nature of the operation if it proved successful. References to keeping the operation secret from the Soviets or other hostile states – the kind one would expect to find in any military intelligence programme of this sort – were nowhere to be found in declassified records on Cobra Mist. The MoD's prolonged commitment to cover storying was also curious given the number of leaks and slip-ups that had been widely publicised throughout the UK and USA. The lies told by the programme were contradicted by leaked information and journalistic commentary as early as 1968. Yet arguments from the DoD to abandon the cover story were rejected by MoD officials who seemed to continue to believe in the cover story's integrity and deceptive success. While it is beyond the scope of this article to offer a full theory of why deception may have been used in this case, and why MoD actors remained committed to it despite evident failure, such findings have implications for future work in this area. To effectively account for operations like Cobra Mist, future sociological theories of state and organisational deception will need to delve deeper into questions about why institutional actors desire secrecy, and how these insider rationales may differ from popular justifications for secrecy and deception in official discourse. Future research should also examine the extent to which self-deception may be an effect of inside deception work (see Arendt, 2001).

A final implication concerns the importance of studies of historical programmes like Cobra Mist for understanding more contemporary forms of secrecy. Current sociologists may be reluctant to examine operations like Cobra Mist on the assumption that they are 'things of the past'. However, while there exist notable differences in the 'ontology of secrecy' (Galison, 2010: 951) today, it was also during the Cold War that many of the earliest prototypes of today's strategies of secrecy and deception were created, tested, refined and institutionalised. As Melley (2012: 12, emphasis in original) argues in the context of the USA, the Cold War era 'institutionalized not simply secret warfare but also public deception as a fundamental element of U.S. policy'. Given this deeper affinity between contemporary and Cold War structures of secrecy, this article calls for sociologists, both current and historical, to further engage with the ongoing declassification of Cold War texts in public archives. More operations like Cobra Mist are becoming accessible to researchers every year. In these texts, one finds more than just the remnants of an eerie past. From the perspective of the present, Cobra Mist and other Cold War deception experts were engaged in a kind of 'paradox of innovation' (Zaret, 1996: 1500). Without knowing it, Cold War deception experts were doing more than just fighting an elusive ideological war; they were creating, experimenting with and refining a whole practical and legal complex that would serve as the basis for many of the institutionalised mechanisms of secrecy and deception today. The strategy of cover storying, used in Cobra Mist and other Cold War programmes, is one piece of this lasting legacy. It is hoped that the five narrative conditions and general framework developed in this article can serve as a means of orienting this future research, and ultimately improving the basis upon which contemporary forms of secrecy and deception are understood.

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