

ABSTRACT

ASSESSING THE COMPETENCE AND CREDIBILITY OF HUMAN SOURCES OF INTELLIGENCE: CONTRIBUTIONS FROM LAW

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These are perilous times in which our nation's security is under continual threat by persons and organizations around the world and here in America. Information supplied to us by human sources concerning the capabilities and intentions of these persons and organizations, who are every bit as capable as they are ruthless, is crucial to our ability to address these threats. We have all seen the many news accounts of our need for more and better HUMINT [Human Intelligence]. But the core issue is: When we obtain an item of HUMINT, to what extent can we believe it? Our ability to make these assessments rests on understanding the competence and credibility of the human source providing this item. Sadly, we are often misled by our HUMINT sources, often regarding matters that have influenced major policy decisions made by our leaders. There is obvious interest in reducing the number of occasions on which we are misled.

The purpose of our talk is to show how we are now exploiting the very rich legacy of experience and scholarship accumulated in the field of law over the past 500 years or so regarding questions to ask about the competence and credibility of witnesses. For quite some time the two of us have been attempting to bring valuable insights from the field of law concerning various evidential and inferential matters to the attention of persons in the Intelligence Community. On this occasion we wish to tell you about a computer-based system called MACE [Method for assessing the Credibility of Evidence] we are developing to exploit what we have learned from law regarding assessments of the competence and credibility of sources of HUMINT. This system is designed to assist in addressing the question: To what extent can we believe this particular item of HUMINT that has just been supplied to us by a human source? MACE employs two different, but entirely complementary, probability systems to help us answer this question. The Baconian system helps us answer the question: How much evidence do we have about this human source and how completely does it answer questions about the source's competence and credibility? The Bayesian system allows us to determine how strong is the evidence we have about this particular human source, and it also provides an odds assessment on whether we can believe what this source is telling us.