

# Joan Cahalin Robinson Prize (2019)

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## Recipient 2019

**Jan Henning**, *Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology*  
For "*Opening the Red Box: The Fire Alarm Telegraph and Technologies of Emergency Response*"

The Robinson Prize Committee is pleased to award the 2019 Joan Cahalin Robinson Prize for the best first-time presentation at SHOT's annual meeting to Jan Henning for "Electricity Has Kept Watch: The Frankfurt Fire Alarm Telegraph 1873-1900." Jan Henning delivered an excellent and engaging presentation analyzing the design and use of information technology.

Henning maps out the location and use of alarm boxes in late nineteenth century Frankfurt Germany. We discover that, as opposed to other municipal infrastructures providing water and gas, the distribution of the fire alarm "red boxes" was quite even across the city—seemingly democratic in nature. However, through rigorous analysis and artful presentation skills, Henning's research revealed that the same communications network used to muster and deliver city resources to extinguish fires was also used to route police forces to sites of riots and other social unrest. Thus, constructed shortly after Frankfurt's annexation into the Prussian Empire, this system helped sustain an anti-democratic and anti-socialist order in the city, undermining Frankfurt's historically politically liberal society.

Deftly weaving together primary and secondary sources, Henning explained how risk management of property and political power dovetailed in a technopolitical system in which firefighters, police, and city administrators became stakeholders in the management and surveillance of Frankfurt.

Henning's thorough local case study of Frankfurt's first fire alarm telegraph system is framed in such a way to provide SHOT colleagues with more generalizable lessons and observations. Central to Henning's narrative is the often inverted relationship between "security" and "liberty" in public spaces. Or more precisely, (and regrettably timeless) the security of property vice the uncertain liberty of individuals in public spaces. Henning concluded that the fire alarm telegraph was not simply the logical consequence of technological know-how and benevolent civic concerns. It also reflected historically-situated politics and class interests of property owners, industrialists, liberals, and the bourgeoisie. Moreover, its use over time demonstrates a distrust against the common population and privileged use by city administration and police. From a systems perspective the fire telegraph safeguarded the orderly function of the industrialized, modern city. Thus, although the system was developed and installed for firefighting, over time, the adaptive—and socially biased—use of the fire telegraph became a very different public asset.

Throughout the talk, Henning maintained a fruitful balance between granular substance and big picture synthesis, making his topic interesting to a diverse SHOT audience. Robinson Committee judges were most impressed with Henning's verve wielding quantitative and qualitative observations gleaned from municipal primary sources. At various points in the

talk, his creative ability to communicate the relevance of technical components as well as employ a broader perspective was evident in the number of phones rising above the audiences' shoulders and heads to snap photos of his PowerPoint slides. Judges reported a confident passion about his subject, engaging the audience in a flow of questions through which Henning continued to demonstrate a tranquil mastery of his topic and a capacity to extemporize

Given this lively, engaging, substantive, and convincing presentation we heartily nominate Jan Henning for the 2019 Joan Cahalin Robinson Prize.