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THE **ROLE** OF
OPEN SOURCES
IN **INTELLIGENCE**

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As the threat that was central to the Cold War national security paradigm has changed, the traditional reliance on classified information must also change. Throughout the Cold War era, intelligence relied heavily on data collected either by human spies or by technical collection activities. All these data were classified and their use was usually controlled, and thus limited by the agencies and groups collecting the information. Insufficient effort was made to exploit the knowledge of the academic community, whose areas experts often had years of regional travel, residence in foreign states of concern, language training, and personal and professional foreign contacts.

In the 21st century, Intelligence analysts, whether in government or the private sector agree that open source (OSINT) data is the bread and butter of analysis, forming the great bulk of the material which they must work. Open sources also provide the collateral material that informs and assists drive the intelligence collection process. The revolution in information technology opens up the possibility of getting diverse open-source data from all over the world at a constant and rapid pace. Open sources are now easily accessible to intelligence analysts – literally, they are at their fingertips – if these analysts are properly trained to exploit them. No good case officers or intercept technicians can make sense out of what they learn without comprehensive knowledge of the world that surrounds their human or electronic sources.

Making a case for avoiding open source (OSINT) intelligence is a bit like saying that the air is filled with carcinogens and other harmful substances, and that it would be better not to breathe. OSINT is the lifeblood of intelligence. Statistics vary, but most seem to agree that OSINT makes up 70-80 percent of the United States intelligence data base. Except for North Korea, Iraq, and perhaps Belarus, few societies today are so carefully controlled that learning about them from open sources is difficult. And even in the closed societies, the barriers are beginning to break down.

Nowadays, the conventional wisdom suggests that the greatest problem is the excess of open sources now overwhelming the ability of analysis to sort through it. This pressure, though not new, has been exacerbated by the proliferation of open source data in recent years. In fact, this has always been a major problem in intelligence and not with open sources.

The second commonly accepted complaint about open sources is that it is unreliable. This has been true, but over time, as with most other kinds of intelligence sources, analysts learn which sources to trust and which are likely to be incorrect, biased, and disinformation. This is especially true of media sources. In many parts of the world, media sources are controlled by individuals, political parties, or other groups that have a particular line to sell. This may prove useful to the analyst, after learning what the line is. The World Wide Web has led to the proliferation of individual sites that produce disinformation.

Not only are open sources at times indistinguishable from secrets, but open sources often surpasses classified information in value for following and analyzing intelligence issues. Before terrorists act, they issue warnings, religious leaders of their community deliver sermons, and political leaders plead their cause. Open source (OSINT), while they may not tell us where the next bomb will explode, do allow us to understand the terrorist agenda and act thereby to address grievances or launch competing campaigns for hearts and minds.

Without technologies to sort, note repetitions, prioritize, and search intelligently through diverse types of data streams, it will be difficult to transform open sources into OSINT that might provide critical information about intentions, actions, trends, networks, and therefore detect significant security threats. Open sources can also be critical in evaluating social, political, and economic trends. OSINT can play a critical role in several situations, either as an integral part of an intelligence assessment, as a means to protect sources and methods, or as a way to facilitate international and operational activities. The key to effective use of open sources is understanding when they can be of value, how to obtain them, and how to evaluate their accuracy.

The Internet presents its own type of validation challenge. Unlike newspapers or television news reporters, whose bias is well known or whose accuracy is often questioned, information on the Internet can appear authoritative even when its author is unknown. Intelligence analysts must become familiar with those websites whose information can generally be trusted, but at the same time develop criteria for determining

the veracity of any information obtained from them if they are to exploit the richness of the Internet rather than be exploited by it.

The next generation of intelligence analysts will probably demand easy and ongoing access to at least electronic open sources because of their own comfort level with using the Internet for research, analysis, communications, and dissemination. Therefore, the mere passage of time will eventually cause the intelligence community to overcome some of these mindset and institutional barriers. But the European and American intelligence services afford to wait for these generational change to occur, given our security environment?

Over all, the intelligence community has already found itself competing with nongovernmental and media groups for accurate assessments of rapidly unfolding events. In addition, transnational threats require that the intelligence community develop analysts with transnational competence, which means relying more extensively on OSINT materials and expertise.

Therefore, the question which needed to be asked is whether intelligence services in the European Union member states as well as the American intelligence community will be able to develop technical and human resources to facilitate the manipulation of all these materials. Will the network of diverse human resources be cultivated and sustained and will there be organizational support for the effective use of open sources?

To defeat the transnational networks of actors such as Osama Bin Laden will require a dynamic, interactive transnational effort that relies on all relevant information regardless of its classification. Intelligence community in Europe and USA need a professional network that transcends territorial borders, and it needs to be comfortable turning to local as well as global information. Significantly, analysts have to be open to the diversity of cultural paradigms, which may have different rules, communication patterns and norms.

The intelligence analysts of the future will need to have good multicultural communication and language skills, as the European and American intelligence community works more consistently and collaboratively with its foreign counterparts.

In a period when intelligence has to get itself out of the Cold War mode, and use innovative methods against enemies, open source intelligence will remain an important factor in collection and analysis. The downside is that intelligence managers, eager to try highly specialized technical collection methods, may ignore what remains a mainstay of intelligence work in the 21st century. Equally important will be having organizational leadership that monitors the use of open sources and works to eradicate the current bias against open sources. Only then will assessments be truly all source.

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