

Evolution of Intel: How Valuable is OSINT?

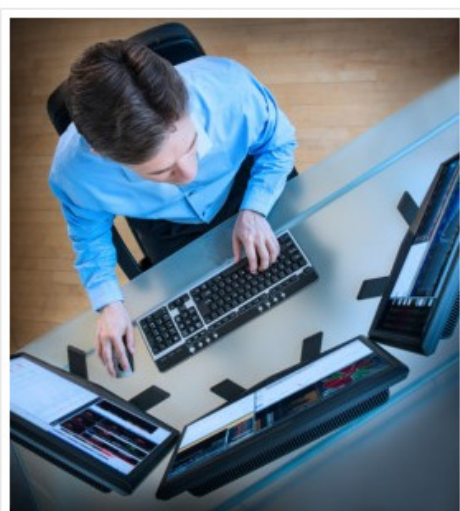
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By **Dr. Brett Miller**, Faculty Member, [Intelligence Studies](#), at American Military University

I once heard the post-9/11 era referred to as the “golden age of SIGINT.” SIGINT, shorthand for signals intelligence, is a form of intelligence gathering that involves the collection of signals. The reference to its golden age is based on the communications explosion that occurred after the turn of the millennium coupled with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which enabled SIGINT to provide enhanced quality and value to the intelligence community (IC).

SIGINT is not a new capability and has played a large part in all military conflicts and actions since World War II. Despite its widespread use, SIGINT was often perceived by the IC as being less valuable than human intelligence (HUMINT). However, the years following 9/11 brought a major change to the extent that SIGINT was used by the IC. SIGINT is now perceived as being the premier intelligence capability, overtaking HUMINT as the intelligence of choice for military leaders national decision makers.

Should OSINT be Considered Intelligence?



Today, we are seeing another, similar explosion with a new form of intel gathering: open-source intelligence (OSINT). [This shift is caused by the massive amount of readily available information via Internet-based outlets worldwide.](#)

However, many IC professionals do not consider OSINT to be a true intelligence discipline. After all, many argue, the information gathered is readily obtained through unclassified sources regardless of the domain. I would argue that, not only is OSINT a vital aspect of the intelligence apparatus, it is a force multiplier.

OSINT started gaining momentum with the shift to 24/7 news cycle (think CNN) and the availability of nearly all forms of content on the Internet. In addition to magazines, newspapers, radio, and other forms of media becoming available online, there was also an explosion of new forms of content including social networking sites, wikis, blogs, and video-sharing sites. All of this content is easily accessible, readily available, and offers the IC a rich source of information.

Challenges of Open-Source Intelligence

Of course, there are significant challenges with having so much information available. As outlined by Mark Lowenthal in his book, [Intelligence: From Policy to Secrets](#):

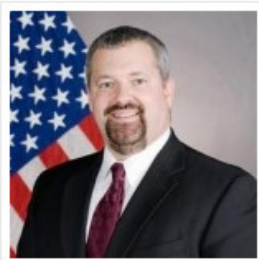
“The main disadvantage of OSINT is the sheer volume of information that is available and trying to make sense of that information.”

The amount of information can be tempered by focusing on the intelligence requirements or the needs of politicians and commanders. Without such focus, much of the information available ends up being noise and brings no value to the intelligence picture.

The use of OSINT helps address gaps and enhance the intelligence picture where traditional INTs have not provided a comprehensive picture. This enables OSINT to be a force multiplier and contribute significant value to the intelligence arena.

I do not know if we are currently experiencing the golden age of OSINT. My personal opinion is that we will never reach that point, as the IC will never solely rely on OSINT as the lone INT to make national strategic decisions. That conclusion is very different from what SIGINT brings to the table.

However, I do believe there is a significant increase in the IC’s understanding and reliance on OSINT and a better perception of its value to the overall intelligence apparatus. As the federal budget continues to be reduced at a significant rate, the IC must continue to find new and innovative ways to support our nation’s decision makers. Incorporating OSINT is one way to add value and help reduce blind spots where other INT capabilities may not be successful.



About the Author: [Dr. Brett Miller](#) is an intelligence professional having spent 20+ years within the national intelligence apparatus supporting mission-critical initiatives impacting national and international security. Additionally, Dr. Miller spent 8+ years as an educator teaching university-level courses in National Security, Homeland Security, Intelligence, Cyber, and Information Assurance. Dr. Miller holds a PhD in Business Administration, Masters of Strategic Studies, M.S. in Telecommunications and Computers, M.S. in Information Technology Systems Management, and a B.S. in Computer Science from Park University. He is a certified Intelligence Community Officer and a graduate of two of the Department of Defense’s most prestigious leadership programs: The U.S. Army War College and the Defense Leadership and Management Program (DLAMP). You can follow Dr. Miller on Twitter:

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