OSINT: The State of the Art, the Artless State

Mark M. Lowenthal

One of the unique burdens of being a practitioner of and advocate for open-source intelligence (OSINT) is the constant need to define what OSINT is and why it matters. Even though these are not controversial issues, it is useful to begin on common ground.

Seen from the perspective of the Intelligence Community (IC), OSINT is usually regarded as "everything else," after the classified sources of IMINT, SIGINT, HUMINT and MASINT are accounted for. Each of these four collection disciplines differs from the others in what it collects and how it collects it. Because a significant portion of OSINT is unique, extracted from an array of textual sources, it has traditionally been considered a separate category of intelligence information.

In fact, however, OSINT is the most pervasive of the INTs, rather than a separate category. It occupies its own niche as well as some part of each of the other INTs. Beyond the textual sources of OSINT, the only aspect that differentiates it from other collection disciplines is the fact that it is not clandestine in nature. Many aspects of OSINT are quite the same as the other collection disciplines, because open-source intelligence is a facet of each of them, not an entirely separate discipline. It is more useful and

A New Way To Visualize The Collection Disciplines

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If the IC were to understand OSINT better, it might get the emphasis it deserves. Seeing OSINT as a facet of each of the other collection disciplines underscores the importance of open-source information to the all-source process. OSINT matters because it can be a cost effective, significant source of intelligence. OSINT should be seen as something less than a consolidation prize—something done grudgingly, haltingly, and poorly in the IC.

The State of the Art

Open-source intelligence today is a much wider field than a few years ago. Most OSINT practitioners still start (and, too often, stop) with unique textual sources. These fall

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into two major and two minor categories.

The most important textual source, in my view, is commercial media vendors, two of whom dominate: Dow Jones Interactive and Lexis-Nexis. Both offer access to multiple worldwide sources of information via a website. These sources include newspapers, magazines, and some broadcast transcripts—all in English translations that are accurate and reliable. The websites allow specific searches by words and combinations of words, and by specific periods of time. It is possible to create permanent files of search terms so that they do not have to be reconstructed each day.

The second major OSINT text category is the worldwide web itself. Here the OSINT practitioner faces several problems:

• The first challenge is sheer volume: what were once thousands of pages of information have become billions. This may be the ultimate “needle in a haystack” problem. It is compounded by the fact that no two search engines will identify the exact same sites. A better approach is to use meta-search engines, i.e., search engines that are actually a combination of other search engines. For example, Copen-nic.com simultaneously searches Alta Vista, Excite, HotBot, Lycos, MSN Web Search, Yahoo, and several others. This type of search increases the chance of finding the best sites, although there still is no guarantee. Access to these

meta-search engines is free via the Internet itself.\(^2\)

• Another difficulty is source validation. The web is a vast electronic bulletin board where users can post anything they want. There is no restraint, no authorization, and no authentication. It is the First Amendment on a global scale, pushed to the point of anarchy. As with any other source, over time analysts learn which sources are reliable and which are not, but it is a pretty steep learning curve at the outset, with lots of chaff and little wheat.

The two minor textual sources of OSINT are hard copy material, primarily books, and so-called gray literature. Yes, books still matter in the “e-age.” Using books, of course, usually requires visiting a library, and analysts are increasingly reluctant to do this. “If I can’t get it on the web, it’s not worth getting,” seems to be the attitude. Gray literature is one of those phrases of art that means different things to different people. I think that some OSINT practitioners like to use the phrase “gray literature” because it gives a patina of “spookiness.” It should not. The Fourth International Conference on Gray Literature, held in Washington in October 1999, defined this source as: “That which is produced on all levels of government, academics, business and industry in print and electronic formats, but which is not controlled by commercial publishers.” This can be a useful range of sources, although it usually takes some search skills to hunt them down.

Those of us toiling in the commercial OSINT vineyards have seen some remarkable changes in open-source intelligence in the last few years. In addition to information from unclassified textual sources, OSINT now pervades all of the collection disciplines.

• Open-source IMINT: The arrival and development of commercial imagery down to resolutions of less than one meter is still a breathtaking and somewhat scary development. Once the exclusive intelligence domain of a few techni-

cally advanced states, high quality imagery is now available to anyone who can afford to buy it.

• Open-source HUMINT: The open elicitation of information by tasked collectors can be an incredibly useful source of intelligence. We are not discussing breaking and entering, bribery, or any other activity that is illegal or even questionable. We are discussing collection that is no different from what foreign service officers or defense attaches do every day. Indeed, I would
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OSINT and Commercial Clients

Providing OSINT to large commercial firms differs considerably from serving IC clients. It remains a nascent industry for several reasons:

The concept of intelligence is inherently less familiar to industry than it is to the IC or to the policy agencies that are served by the IC. One must spend more time explaining what intelligence is, and what it is not.

It is difficult to determine the right point of entry into large firms to make OSINT sales. The president or CEO is too high. Directors of research see OSINT as little more than a threat to their own activities. Other levels and individuals need to be probed. It is a more random effort than dealing with the IC.

Although commercial users of OSINT want "actionable" intelligence, just like US officials, this desire may not match their actual business practices. Large firms do not make key decisions with the same frequency as government officials. Rather, they have sales campaigns that have beginnings, mid-year and end-of-year reviews, and renewed starts. The provision of intelligence on a regular basis...
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The Artless State

Given the rich, evolving OSINT world, why does the IC continue to lag in the use of open-source information? IC defenders of open source will point out, correctly, that the IC has always used OSINT. This is undeniably true. But it is also true that the IC's use of OSINT remains fitful and sometimes grudging, and in no way fully exploits the available opportunities.

I believe part of the reason is institutional. If all of the intelligence we needed were available openly, then we would not have an IC per se. We would have something else—a research center of some sort. The need to collect some intelligence clandestinely, however, leads to an ethos in the IC where clandestine intelligence is consistently valued more highly than open-source information. As currently practiced by the IC, open source is, at best, an add-on to clandestine collection, not a partner.

To be very clear, I do not view OSINT as a panacea for all intelligence requirements. Nor do I believe that the increased availability of OSINT ends the need for various covert sources and methods. There will always be intelligence requirements that can only be met clandestinely. At the same time, we now have more intelligence requirements that can be met openly—if the IC is willing to go in that direction.

The IC's exploitation of OSINT also has been handicapped by the problem of technology seduction noted above. The Community has prospered, in part, because of various technologies it has created—primarily in the collection area. I believe that one of the reasons why OSINT has failed to reach its potential in the IC is because responsible officials forgot that technology was the means and content the end. They pursued technological solutions, but many failed to deliver coherent, useful content to analysts, which should have been the goal.

Broader institutional problems within the IC also figure in how OSINT is handled. I will illustrate by anecdote. I had a contract with an all-source agency to provide OSINT about Bosnia. In a moment of self-abnegation, I pointed out to the agency that they already had Lexis-Nexis service and could obtain on their own some of the OSINT I planned to provide. I will lapse into dialogue to convey the exchange:

All-Source Agency: "Oh, we never use Lexis-Nexis for Bosnia."

Lowenthal: "Why not?"

All-Source Agency: "Because that would reveal that we are interested in Bosnia as a requirement."

Lowenthal: "We have some 9,000 troops in Bosnia. They rotate in and out to great publicity. Don't you think people know we are interested in Bosnia?"
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5,000 SIGINT hits from Iran and Iraq. Good luck." That is not far different from how the IC handles OSINT. It is self-defeating and says much about how the Community views OSINT.

The clearest indication of the sad state of OSINT in the IC, however, is the fact that no one is responsible for it. If I have an IMINT problem, I go to NIMA; if I have a SIGINT problem, I go to the National Security Agency; if I have a HUMINT problem I go to the CIA or the Defense HUMINT Service; even poor MASINT has the Central MASINT Office. To whom do I go if I have an OSINT problem? No one. In Washington, bureaucrats have a nose for which programs will enhance their power and position and which programs are drags. The fact that no one in the IC is responsible for OSINT and no one seeks to be speaks volumes. OSINT is not worth fighting for or acquiring within the IC.

The Role of FBIS

Currently, FBIS is the centerpiece of OSINT in the IC. FBIS has been struggling and declining for years under repeated budget cuts, a sure sign of bureaucratic weakness. Strong programs prosper. FBIS has been providing open-source media coverage for as long as we have had an IC; however, FBIS’s offerings are now outmoded compared to commercial vendors. These vendors are more expensive than FBIS, but the information they provide is more extensive and more timely. In my own open-source practice, I use FBIS occasionally as a supplement, but it is not my information supplier of first choice. I get better coverage from more sources more quickly by going elsewhere.

What Is To Be Done?

First, someone in the IC has to be responsible for OSINT. FBIS is too slender a reed, for the reasons already noted. I do not recommend reviving the Community Open Source Program Office (COSPO), which the DGI properly disbanded in 1998. COSPO, in my view, pursued the technology chimera and forgot about content delivery to analysts. Within the current IC structure, I would designate an OSINT Manager. The OSINT Manager would be responsible for creating a program designed to deliver usable OSINT—i.e., OSINT that has been collected, processed, batched, and sorted—to all-source analysts. I would place the OSINT Manager under the Associate Director of Central Intelligence for Collection, rather than in a specific agency. OSINT should be a service of common concern for every all-source analyst, not something controlled by one agency.

The OSINT Manager should oversee two core activities. One should be to seek the best commercially available technology and commercial vendors to “make the OSINT happen.” The use of commercial off-the-shelf technology is important. There is no sense in
reinventing the wheel, another IC failure in open source. The second—and even more important—core activity should be to determine the OSINT requirements for each analytic office. I would start small, handling offices with discrete responsibilities first. I might recommend beginning with countries of relatively low day-to-day importance to the United States, where sudden crises can catch Washington off guard and where OSINT can handle a very large part of the intelligence requirements—most of which are not being met at all currently.

Happily, the dissemination problem is already solved. Inteliink provides an up and running electronic means to broadcast usable OSINT to whomever might need it. It should be easy to create an OSINT portal for Inteliink, where open-source information can be posted by issue—either regional or topical per the usual IC taxonomy.

Second, to aid in fixing the IC’s OSINT problem I would liberate commercial imagery. Each agency should have its own budget to buy the imagery it needs, after checking with NIMA to make sure that a particular image has not already been purchased. Third, the IC’s goal should be to collect OSINT first, not last, validating it whenever possible with classified sources. OSINT would become an enabler, not a niche filler.

Will all of this take money? Of course it will—and I am well aware of the constraints posed by the IC budget. Ironically, OSINT is a potential money saver.

- A well-integrated, content-focused OSINT program would be the most efficient collection management system we have had, because the IC would know what is available openly and could concentrate its classified collection in those areas where only it will suffice.

- All-source analysts would have more time to analyze, avoiding the frustration and valuable time it takes to do their own OSINT collection, processing, and exploitation.

- The IC would have better intelligence on many of the lower priority issues, where little of what we need to know requires clandestine collection and where we currently devote few collection resources at any rate. These are often the issues that become the “surge” problems, when a Burundi or a Somalia explodes and we scramble for even the most basic information.

Utopia? Not really. It would simply be a smarter use of open-source information than we have at present. It is less an issue of money, know-how, or technology, than it is one of will. OSINT continues to grow and prosper. The IC has yet to take full advantage of it.