

Intelligence in Public Media

Collective Discussion: Toward Critical Approaches to Intelligence as a Social Phenomenon

Hager Ben Jaffel, Alvina Hoffman, Oliver Kearns, and Sebastian Larrson, *International Political Sociology* 14 (2020), 323–44.

Reviewed by Joseph Gartin

For the intelligence practitioner, Ben Haffel, et al., on balance have presented a constructive examination of the state of intelligence studies and the need for alternative ways of understanding the intelligence ecosystem. Fair warning, however: finding the gems in their arguments will require the reader to sift patiently through the academic tailings, among them the introduction in praise of Edward Snowden and the often dense prose.

Sometimes, these combine with wearying effect, as in Alvina Hoffman's discussion of the "social space" of intelligence: "We began this article with Snowden, whose spectacular act of resistance profoundly challenged the unhindered and evermore expansive transnational practices of intelligence agencies. This opened up possibilities for other forms of contestation." For this reviewer, that contestation ought to have begun with interrogating Hoffman's unexamined judgment that Snowden's was an act of resistance, rather than an act of supreme narcissism and an alleged crime for which he ought to face a jury of his peers.

Setting that aside, albeit it with some difficulty, there are themes that bear further exploration by future contributors to *Studies in Intelligence*, beginning with the inherent but often unexamined biases of an intelligence literature that "has been shaped by its founding relationship with Anglo-American state intelligence practice." (324) As the authors note, this very much begins with the creation of this journal in 1955 by Sherman Kent and has extended over the years with the publication of official histories by many Five-Eyes agencies and the periodic releases of considerable historical material through

routine declassification and processes like the Freedom of Information Act and its foreign equivalents. Imperfect as it might be, this corpus of intelligence theory and practice assuredly dwarfs comparable libraries available to researchers seeking to understand the conduct of intelligence in, say, China, Russia, Cuba, North Korea, and the like. Even among more open societies, there is a considerable gap compared to English-language publications that is closing only gradually. There are availability biases in the intelligence literature, but not by design.

The authors reprise a dichotomy observed by Marrin (2016), et al., between the *study of* and *study for* intelligence,^a noting the predominance of intelligence veterans who tend to practice the latter (and it should be said tend to write for *Studies*). This, they argue, points to the need to think of intelligence as a social phenomenon involving state and non-state actors, including individuals, but also involving the "mundane practices of policing, surveillance, and vigilance." (326)

Where and when one draws the line between intelligence and information is a vexing problem, made more difficult still by the emergence of the "data citizen," who produces data for the "purposes of public knowledge, rather than just being a passive object on whom data is collected." (338) They close with a call for research "to study the dynamics of expansion, retreat, and contestation that constantly redefine the boundaries of a social space of intelligence." (340) I think Sherman Kent would argue such dynamics ought to animate the discussion on these pages as well as in academia.



The reviewer: Joseph Gartin is the managing editor of *Studies*.

a. Stephen Marrin, "Improving Intelligence Studies as an Academic Discipline," *Intelligence and National Security* 19, no. 4 (2016): 655–72.

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