

Open Source at a Critical Point in History

The View from CIA's Directorate of Digital Innovation

Daniel L. Richard

The author is the Associate Deputy Director of CIA for Digital Innovation.

In a world of constantly evolving technology and exploding open-source data, the Intelligence Community has a rare opportunity—and obligation—to transform our support to critical national security interests. This opportunity could not have emerged at a more significant time in our history. With the Chinese leadership using coercive measures to increase China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region, it is incumbent on CIA and the IC to produce the all-source intelligence necessary to effectively inform policymakers and help them adopt policies to minimize threats and avoid conflict.

Exploited effectively, the data-rich, open-source environment will provide a tactical advantage to US leaders during a period of escalation or even conflict. For example, commentators and everyday online users can provide near real-time alerts and contextualized OSINT insights on PRC naval movements in the South China Sea or flag possible Chinese preparations for conflict. Providing important datapoints such as these in timely, standalone OSINT intelligence products and as contributions to in-depth finished all-source analysis for policymakers could assist in enhancing

the US government's overall deterrence posture in the Indo-Pacific.

The CIA/Center for the Study of Intelligence June 2024 roundtable discussion, in which participants debated how the IC should optimize open-source collection, and its coverage in this special issue of *Studies in Intelligence* is recognition of the criticality of open-source collection. As the Open-Source Enterprise (OSE) is housed in the Directorate of Digital Innovation (DDI) in CIA and currently serves as the IC's Open-Source Functional Manager, the DDI leadership supported this roundtable as a healthy reflection on the open-source mission and its impact, notwithstanding the prospect that discussants might offer approaches, as they did, that challenge DDI organizational and resource decisions. This is especially true as the DDI leadership views our current national security environment as presenting a critical moment for the open-source community, even as budgets are under increasing strain.

DDI believes that the IC can best leverage its unique open-source capabilities under the existing

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federated structure, with OSE housed in the DDI. As we focus on CIA provision of the digital capabilities necessary to meet our urgent global challenges, we must be mindful that any significant bureaucratic change to current open-source efforts will take critical time and energy away from the underlying open-source mission. Based on our experience of standing up other new IC organizations, it is likely that six months to a year will be required to clarify roles and build new structures. Given today's circumstances, we are in a critical period in our competition with the PRC, and we do not have time to lose. So, it is important that any discussion be tethered to this geopolitical reality. Even so, we need to remain open to change and to approach the use of open-source differently than we had considered it in the past. Determining how best to unleash the true capability of OSINT should drive our thinking. This roundtable was one step in DDI's effort to be open to innovation in this space.

As readers consider the different views found in the discussion here, they should reflect on how OSE has already been working to transform IC capabilities. OSE is no longer the FBIS structure of years gone past. Under current OSE leadership, OSE has made significant changes by making open-source information more discoverable, useable, impactful, and relevant to national security priorities. At the end of FY 2023, OSE launched a transformational platform for real-time and tailored situational awareness of world events that enables both the CIA and IC to view generative artificial intelligence-curated events and summaries based on OSE's global collection. OSE's work has been lauded by commercial AI thought leaders as one of "the best use of large language models." OSE's reporting on public unrest, coups, conflicts and

humanitarian disasters often provides the early warning and most detailed insights into these breaking events. As DNI Open-Source Executive Jason Barrett noted, "OSINT can help address 60 to 70 percent of our intelligence requirements." DDI believes OSE can turn that potential into a reality.

DDI's vision is to leverage our existing expertise both inside CIA and with our partners outside the agency to meet these opportunities and surpass expectations by developing novel ways to tap into the exponential growth in publicly and commercially available data. Partnering with the private sector, academia, and foreign partners to more efficiently collect and process the data that is most relevant to our mission. Focusing on tools to detect synthetic media and mis/disinformation in the open-source collection and identifying novel ways to integrate AI/ML capabilities to automate workflows and enhance expertise. We cannot do this alone and we cannot, and should not, strive to collect everything. Instead, we should be ruthless in focusing on that segment of publicly and commercially available information that can provide unique insights to our policymakers. We should seek to recruit and retain officers who see the transformational potential of open-source activities and can provide diverse and creative ways to innovate in this space.

We look forward to continued discussions on these issues in the weeks and months ahead and welcome views from inside and outside the government on how best to seize the moment and truly make OSINT the INT of first resort. The demands on the CIA and the Intelligence Community during this critical time in our history deserves nothing less. ■