



Spies give way to 'sexy' social media

By Esther Carey
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Gathering intelligence [from social media](#) has finally become as "sexy" as more traditional clandestine methods.

Open source intelligence — generally regarded as information gathered through methods other than clandestine activity — is the "hot new field" in the intelligence community, said Patrick O'Neil, director of analytic development at the Open Source Center (OSC) in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

Intelligence agencies are developing their capabilities to gather useful information by scouring social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.

The amount of data available continues to grow from the inclusion of these non-traditional sources. As a result, members of the intelligence community must develop new tools and best practices to analyze the information.

There are opportunities involved, but there also are challenges in the process of adjusting to the shift, as O'Neil and two other panelists discussed at the event hosted by the Government Executive Media Group and the Intelligence and National Security Alliance in Washington Tuesday.

O'Neil said the Director of National Intelligence has chosen the Open Source Center to act as the intelligence community's functional manager for open source intelligence and to coordinate resources and methodologies between governmental agencies.

"Our goal is to collect information once and distribute it to everybody in the government who needs it," O'Neil said.

Open source benefits

Incorporating more traditional research into the intelligence community has only started within the past 15 years or so, said David Abruzzino, the director of the Open Source Intelligence Exchange at Fairmont State University.

"We need to see social media as intelligence gathering very similar to spying," Abruzzino said. "Part of this is deciding what information we can get from open sourcing and what needs to



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come from clandestine methods. It is important to integrate the two."

There is a cost to secret work which makes traditional research valuable, O'Neil said.

"Finding open source information is easier, cheaper and safer," he added. "It allows us to save the spy work for bigger issues."

Culling valuable intelligence from social media is becoming a specialized tradecraft, said Craig Parisot, chief operating officer at Invertix, a company that builds data analytics tools for federal intelligence agencies. It is important for companies to emphasize the professional nature of social media analysis in order to attract new employees in the area, he added.

Challenges of using social media

One primary concern about the emergence of this new intelligence source focuses on [people's rights to privacy and civil liberties](#). This is an area in which ODNI, Congress and others still are developing policy, and the differing circumstances of the various panel members affected their various safeguards.

The OSC is not allowed to collect intelligence on U.S. citizens, O'Neil said, adding that safeguards and workforce monitoring are in place to prevent even inadvertent collections on Americans from happening. Also, a demonstrable intelligence value must be shown before gathering information on targets in other countries can begin.

"We're very mindful of the sensitivities surrounding that," he said. "On the one hand, people don't want to hear that we're monitoring social media. On the other hand, people would be appalled if we told them we aren't monitoring social media. We're very mindful of where that line is and we pay a lot of attention to staying on the right side of it."

The Open Source Intelligence Exchange has more freedom since it is part of a university and not a spy agency, Abruzzino said. The group cannot do anything for a law enforcement agency that the agency could not legally do on its own, he added.

In general, people need to keep in mind that updates on Twitter are completely open to anyone with Internet access and users have no reasonable expectation of privacy, Abruzzino said.

That's not necessarily the case with more walled-off platforms such as Facebook, which allow users to determine their own privacy settings and where account holders don't intend to make all their posts public.

Invertix only accesses public data, Parisot said. His company also ensures that it is transparent with governmental clients about where information comes from. In the end, he said, individuals



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are responsible for what they post online.

Some other open sourcing challenges the panel discussed included:

- The necessity of being familiar with the nuances of a culture when analyzing content written in another language.
- Keeping in mind who uses social media — typically a small percentage of a country's population which tends to be more activist oriented.
- Training analysts and keeping them up-to-date on new social media forms in a constantly shifting environment.
- Managing and shifting through the massive amounts of data available. Despite the challenges, there are also success stories from utilizing social media.

Abruzzino said the West Virginia National Guard asked his company to monitor social media for areas of trouble during the recent East Coast Derecho storm. Analysts found a tweet from a woman without power and whose husband was on a respirator. The Guard delivered gasoline and a generator to the house.

"If we helped save the life of even just that one man, I consider that worth it," Abruzzino said.

Social media has enabled ODNI to monitor changes of mood in [other parts](#) of the world where the agency does not tend to focus its attention, O'Neil said. By comparing snapshots from different days and keeping an eye out for issues such as increasing arrests, the Open Source Center can have a finger on the pulse of what may be trending in other countries.

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