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*Intellectual Excellence in Defence*

Networking in Open Source Intelligence  
By Anne Aldis

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# Networking in Open Source Intelligence

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## Background

Recent intelligence and policy failures have prompted me to restate some standard guidelines for using open sources in analysis, and to highlight some ways in which these often underestimated resources can be used to analyse and forestall today's and tomorrow's problems. I make no apologies for interlocking intelligence and policy-making. Analysis and intelligence are not ends in themselves, and practitioners of those disciplines need to know what the policymakers need; and the policymakers need to know what they will receive (and maybe more importantly, what they will NOT), and how to use this valuable resource. There is room for improvement on both sides of this equation.

## The Growing Relevance of Open-source Material

Despite the hangups of a secret-obsessed intelligence community, we need to recognise that much of what we need to fight current and future threats is available from open sources, but sources outside the official system. We must adapt our structures to use them better. We must also recognise and act on the fact that the main customer for the threat analysis is no longer the Ministry of Defence. Police, customs and immigration officers and other civil agencies are now the front line, and they have both insights to offer and operational requirements that intelligence should be servicing.

The recently-acknowledged change of threat arguably amounts to the need for a revolution in the use of information sources. There are always problems in recognising a revolution while it's in progress, and of managing revolutionary change: which bits of the existing system are still fit for purpose, which are going to survive? But it is certainly possible to modify existing structures with an eye to flexibility, to keep them relevant and useful.

In the UK's Defence Academy we are exploring ways in which this might be achieved. But before I expand on our experience, a reminder of the nature of open sources will highlight the temptations of not taking them seriously. These sources are:

- far too many – they include a vast amount, for example written, news & other media, electronic, personal contacts with experts & non-experts' views. The CNN reporter may sometimes be better informed than the expert. Nowadays traditional written sources are very much lower in the order of utility than they used to be;
- of variable quality and authoritativeness – they may well be biased, and it would be easy to discount them.
- But it is vital to know what others are saying, so we can't just choose our favourites. This applies both to public opinion on 'our' side and to what 'the other side' may be saying. Even if it's wrong, opinion is a force to be reckoned with.
- So don't mirror image, or pursue or believe your own wishful thinking in where your sources and analysis may lead.
- Therefore the analyst needs to know what she is looking at and looking for, to achieve a realistic, balanced, nuanced picture.
- It follows from this that such analysis cannot usefully be done from a cold, ignorant start on a project – topic basis. Analysts need nurturing and training to develop expertise on a particular subject.

## Methodology

The basic problem is how to transform a huge volume of often repetitive material, spiced with flashes of real insight, into something consistently usable. The dangers of using open source analysis for policymaking are twofold at this stage:

- the temptation to equate collection with analysis. The 'dodgy dossier' made public as the UK's justification for its judgements on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction is an object lesson in how not to use open sources.
- the temptation to ignore it because it's all obvious and known to everybody. It is not, and your most secret analysis or policy options must be firmly grounded in the real world. It's easy in the rarefied atmosphere in ministries and other political circles to forget that the information and decision air you breathe may be very different to that outside. In particular, priorities, events and relationships can be distorted by political and bureaucratic timetables.

Traditional open sources are particularly good for:

- getting a basic grounding
- sniffing the wind
- seeing what's not there, what others would like to hide, e.g., by looking through what they are always pushing to what is not discussed.

They're not better or worse than classified sources, just different. But you can't do good classified analysis without them. They are the landscape within which the classified features sit.

Of course classic analysis by accumulation of small pieces of information works on unclassified sources too: a particular, though time-consuming, strength is the capacity to compile biographies and relationship matrices over long periods of time. This highlights the importance of usable databases, but a collective memory is not now enough. We need a corporate one too, i.e. to know what the community as a whole might already know about. We seem at the moment to be wasting our own intellectual capital in creating and fighting bureaucracy as well as not making use of the expertise that is inside other people's heads.

## Contemporary Aspects

Today's problem is that what the intelligence and policy professionals need to understand is often not the detailed number crunching of weapon system capabilities – it's the new 'opposition' networks, their attitudes, synergies and opportunities. People outside the official system know more about that than we ever will. Intelligence analysis can't be done in a closed room – it never could, but it was nice (and easy) to pretend the closed access lent special insights and so the professionals could feel superior. Analysis is improved by discussion, and that has to be candid, and include those who can really contribute and those who see things differently. Today those who can really contribute are outside the room, and we need to encourage that contribution without prejudicing the few real secrets that need to be protected.

'Proper' intelligence should be dealing with hot issues, and yet the unofficial world's experts who have the insights to inform policy and practical decisions will not qualify for security clearance – and by the time it gets into the everyday intelligence world it's old news. So the 'official' analysis is often well behind the curve, even if printed and electronic open source media are scanned as a routine procedure.

The traditional security culture engenders a tendency to control, define, hierarchise and so stifle and exclude real alternative scenarios. If you feel that representing the truth upwards is more than your job is worth, your organisation probably has this tendency to excess. As Fang Zhu wrote:

*...the more authoritarian the regime, the more focused the elite will be on power and status rather than policymaking. Candid policy debates require strict legal and procedural protection, without which it is simply too risky for elites to act solely on their ideological convictions and policy concerns.<sup>i</sup>*

In other words, even closed societies need protected spaces within which policy options can be debated. By extension, open networks are a necessary part of successful organisations, allowing them to test, interpret and develop the rules and truths embedded within them.<sup>ii</sup> Otherwise, as Neil Kinnock warned the Labour Party conference in Bournemouth in 1985:

*'You start with far fetched [untested policies]. They are pickled into a rigid dogma, a code, and you go through the years sticking to that, outdated, misplaced, irrelevant to the real needs and you end in... grotesque chaos.'*

If this sounds familiar, you need to explore the scope for both structural and attitudinal reform. But there are practical difficulties of getting the insights of outsiders into the intelligence and policy systems:

- These assets take effort to acquire and use. In fact, the capacity has to be built in advance, and nurtured until it's needed. It cannot be bought in readymade when needed urgently.
- It takes time to establish trust and mutual respect (and sometimes we will need to build Chinese walls even outside the system to protect that trust).
- Those inside need to know what are the right questions to ask, and,
- where to place the issue-pushers (both inside and outside the system) in the accuracy and influence spectrums.

## The ARAG Approach

In the UK, the Defence Academy's Advanced Research and Assessment Group, which incorporates the Conflict Studies Research Centre, has begun to develop a flexible mechanism which harnesses external expertise, but which is managed from inside the system. It has assembled trusted networks of people who are knowledgeable on one or more specific issues, from academia, business, elsewhere in government, etc. These are brought together, often at short notice, in different combinations for different topics – they are not permanent, self-perpetuating single-issue advisory committees. This cluster approach gives policymakers and educators the opportunity easily to tap into detailed research already being done by experts in a variety of organisations, as each cluster member brings with him his own network of experts in allied fields. It also allows trusted foreigners to be part of the group, and provides headroom within which junior researchers can develop their own expertise. The aim is to put the decision-taker directly into contact with the right people, irrespective of affiliation or staffing structures.

Thoroughly researched analytical papers written by in-house analysts and published on the Academy's website provide the bedrock of credibility which encourages outsiders to participate as part of an expert group. They also find the interface with policymakers valuable, and it can galvanise and guide their own research into new directions once they appreciate the needs of decision takers.

The resulting hubs and spokes of a complex network form a resilient resource, which can be accessed and combined at several different but interlocking levels. In this they resemble some criminal or terrorist networks, which interact, combine and separate on an ad hoc basis for specific purposes. Everybody gets something out of the association, and this creates a positive dynamic encouraging future participation.

Such an association of experts can be used both to respond to immediate needs and to offer longer-term perspectives and alternative scenarios. Of course, the requirement should be to anticipate not to predict – and it is important not just to focus on the short term, or the current highest priorities. The real value of intelligence analysis should be to provide early warning, especially of the potential conjunction and overlapping of threats and challenges already recognised. This is very difficult to do in a segmented, stovepiped structure where cross-cutting linkages may only be identified too late, at too high a level, or by accident in loose talk in the corridors.

Naturally, there are pitfalls in this approach too. It must be borne in mind that there are no permanent challenges, and thus the subject focus and relative priorities of the clusters must be regularly reviewed to ensure their continuing relevance. The process of continual renewal is time-consuming, and the insights gained may well be uncomfortable. Such a network also has to prove it's not just a cosy chat-room, self-fulfilling or self-gratifying. Therefore continuing efforts need to be made to include more than a single 'acceptable' in-crowd going through the motions of garnering alternative views to add false consensual weight to a decision already taken.

## Finally...

In conclusion, I would like to summarise what we are looking for in the new breed of intelligence analysis. First, language ability plus cultural awareness. This requires serious investment in educating specialists inside the system, even if they are already well educated in relevant disciplines when recruited. Training on the exploitation of open sources should also be prioritised. Surprisingly, we have found that given time, interest and appropriate topics to work on, experience of, e.g., China can be refocused to deliver useful insights into e.g., the Middle East. The ever-present dangers of going native and groupthink need to be minimised by constant inputs from a variety of sources and participants. Although the use of databases and collective memory is a natural concomitant of good intelligence work, we need to pay serious attention to exploiting the Web while avoiding its pitfalls. This is where today's teenagers socialise, and its use should be as natural as breathing, not something that has to be a separate, special operation from an analyst's desk.

The communities of interest, which the USA and other countries have begun to develop in military areas should be emulated in the intelligence world. We need to do this also at the civil/military interface, in and across government, and at insider/outsider levels. And above all, the old command, control and stifle management style needs to be changed to one of leadership and coordination – creating a climate of confidence not measurement. The aim should be to create 'magic spaces' that encourage collaboration and minimize free-riding – so a looser structure that can learn & adapt, and we can learn inside, which does not punish experimentation or minor failure. And we must involve the policy makers in these spaces.

Old bureaucracies do not visibly fail: they inhibit new growth by adding layers of 'protection'. We must evaluate afresh the utility of existing security procedures because the world has overtaken them. Have we the courage to strip a lot of this dead wood away?

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## Notes

- i. Fang Zhu, *Gun Barrel Politics*, Westview Press, 1998.
- ii. My thanks to Simon Atkinson for these and other insights in this paper.