

How the Intelligence Community Has Held Back Open-Source Intelligence, and How It Needs to Change

Chris Rasmussen

Integration is not the main problem to solve when it comes to improving OSINT operations. Overuse of mission-integration jargon has hampered the professionalization of OSINT. In fact, in my view more OSINT silos—clusters of tightly connected business functions—are critically necessary to improve OSINT operations in the IC.

Plans and strategies for improving open-source intelligence (OSINT) operations in the Intelligence Community often suffered from framing challenges. Many proposals for the way forward framed OSINT primarily as a collection challenge, which reduced OSINT to a collection supplement to classified analysis. This collection framing did not adequately help OSINT professionalize as a full-fledged analytic discipline. Moreover, it perpetuated the thinking that OSINT requires more “integration” into classified operations to be successful. Integration is not the main problem to solve when it comes to improving OSINT operations. Overuse of mission-integration jargon has hampered the professionalization of OSINT. In fact, in my view more OSINT silos—clusters of tightly connected business functions—are critically necessary to improve OSINT operations in the IC.^a

All businesses and endeavors, public or private, for profit, or non-profit, or mission driven, form specialized and shared vocabularies around their execution of tasks and labor. Jargon helps specialized teams communicate and coordinate. However, the overuse of jargon to

the point where the words and terms are not reevaluated with frequency in relation to changing business, political, or technological dynamics leads to groupthink and hinders the flow of new ideas. The overuse of jargon within a specialized field causing harm by reducing honest dialogue and obscuring problems is not unique to the IC. The physicist Richard Feynman, who helped investigate the *Challenger* space shuttle disaster in 1986, argued that if you cannot explain advanced scientific concepts without the use of jargon, there are not only gaps in your knowledge of the subject itself, but the inflated jargon-laden language creates an illusion of authority on the subject itself that lacks introspection and limits creative thinking.

Common IC jargon used often within the context of OSINT includes the words “integration,” “tipping and queuing,” “enhancement,” and “foundational.” All these terms are reductionist and subordinate OSINT to classified operations. Was SIGINT professionalized in the 1950s and 1960s to “enhance” imagery intelligence (what we now refer to as geospatial intelligence, or GEOINT)? Was GEOINT professionalized in

a. Recently, there has been positive energy and movement around OSINT in the IC, including promulgation of the *IC OSINT Strategy 2024–2026* in March 2024. Framing OSINT more as an analytic discipline, in addition to collection, would add to the momentum. The strategy document is available on both odni.gov and cia.gov.

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the early 2000s with an eye toward “tipping and queuing” HUMINT? No, these INTs were developed through labor specialization, clear mastery levels tied to promotion paths, tradecraft and quality standards, flagship outputs, journals to advance the field, and intentional hiring and recruitment. The objective was to create intelligence insights that could stand shoulder to shoulder with one another. Only OSINT is viewed as a building block for other INTs and nested under adjacent disciplines. OSINT also lacks many elements of professionalization noted above such as the lack of a flagship product.

Integration

The IC's focus on integration has turned it into unchecked jargon that adversely affects OSINT in a unique way. It has been used extensively in the wake of the 2004 Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act (IRTPA) as a rallying cry to pull information together and to reduce stovepiping. Although still a continuing challenge in the IC, the information-integration push has had the opposite effect on OSINT by reducing it to a collection supplement for classified content.

On a personal note, I started and advanced my career heeding the post-9/11 integration call after the IRTPA created the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI). During 2005–2009, I worked (and received

joint-duty credit) with Intelink under the new ODNI structure.^a I was an energetic advocate for the deployment, growth, and use of new Web 2.0 collaborative technologies inside the IC such as Intellipedia (wiki technology), blogging and social bookmarking software, and collaborative picture and video tagging services to flatten the IC and bust silos.

Before the introduction of these Web 2.0 technologies, IC users relied on email, message traffic, and maybe some boutique collaborative functions in Lotus Notes to share content. Web 2.0 collaborative technologies helped change the information sharing culture, and the IC is a far more integrated place today than it was before 9/11. While I am appreciative and proud I was able to be a part of this, more integration won't scale and professionalize OSINT.

Integration was and remains a noble goal. However, the word's overuse as a remedy for most intelligence challenges beyond the context of post-9/11 horizontal-sharing reforms is impeding the professionalization of OSINT as a full-fledged analytic discipline. It misidentifies the problem to be solved with OSINT as one needing more integration rather than the need for more OSINT silos to help with OSINT professionalization.

The groupthink in the IC holds the view that multi-INT fusion where OSINT, SIGINT, HUMINT, and GEOINT come together in a

classified environment is the ultimate end state. Of course, serious policy decisions are made with all available intelligence. No one debates that. What is up for debate is how to achieve integration with OSINT front and center, not just supplementing other INTs or serving only as a tipping and cueing tool.

As in academia, the IC uses citations to demonstrate research, share information, and enhance credibility. GEOINT reports cite SIGINT reports, SIGINT reports cite GEOINT reports, and so on. How is OSINT cited currently? Some IC products use endnote citations with formatting modeled on academic styles mostly noting open press reporting. But where is the more analytic, professionalized, and official OSINT report for citation? It does not exist in the IC. How does an INT professionalize without a flagship publication? It cannot.

Datasets, requests for information (RFIs), librarian notes, and collection summary reports are not the same as an official, serialized analytic product line with an agency logo on it. There is something special about the written word when narratives are typed out, the content is coordinated for feedback, and editors are involved with sharpening the words. Looking at an open-data dashboard or commercial data-visualization system simply does not carry the same gravitas and seriousness of the written word.

Silos and Stovepipes Are Good

Silos and stovepipes are good things. I know this sounds counterintuitive because the operative

a. Intelink was organized under ODNI's Central Information Office after the standup of ODNI. This was fertile agency-neutral territory where Web 2.0 tools were protected and grown.

word in the IC since 9/11 has been integration. Even outside the IC, the concept of breaking silos in the business world is viewed primarily as an unalloyed good. The negative mental image of information hoarding and the connected power plays within an organization is the dominant one, but the positive aspects of silos when it comes to professionalizing and effectively executing a discipline or function is often overlooked. For substantial tasks, you need specialists working closely together. To do this, silos frequently form within organizations to focus expenditures and execute core functions: recruiting, training and development, professional standards, customer service, knowledge management, labor segmentation, and so forth. Jargon emerges to convey specialized tasks.

Looking back at the history and evolution of SIGINT, GEOINT, and HUMINT, one can see how silos formed over time to effectively execute the function of the INT, just as in other sectors. OSINT is often called an INT but few of the things noted in the silos above exist in the current execution of OSINT in IC, nor does the history of OSINT match the history of professionalization compared to the other INTs.

OSINT needs its own silos and must go through the evolution of siloed formation and function noted previously just like every other INT. If OSINT is not “siloed,” OSINT in the IC will never be effectively professionalized because without the elements noted previously, no enterprise can effectively operate at scale. Because OSINT lacks silos,

it has been executed as a support function within the other silos that have formed over time. More simply, OSINT is a support function of the other INTs and is therefore not really an INT at this time.

Substantial OSINT silos can be formed within existing organizations, but this has not materialized to date in the IC as the residue of embedding minor OSINT functions with other classified INTs hinders the evolution of the silos needed for OSINT to professionalize and scale. To restate the elements of siloing mentioned previously in the context of OSINT professionalization as questions: Is there a substantial OSINT recruitment pipeline? Are there many OSINT jobs available in the IC? Are new job titles being developed to handle labor specialization? Is there an OSINT school? Is there an OSINT journal? Does OSINT have specialized and large IT investments? Does OSINT have a content or product voice? Does OSINT have official narrative outputs? Are there clear promotion paths for OSINT specialization? Compared to the other INTs, the answer is no to all the above.

From Collection Mindset to Analytic Mindset

OSINT’s framing as a collection discipline to supplement classified operations needs to shift to thinking of OSINT as full-fledged analytic discipline on its own. For example, the ordering of Intelligence Community Directives (ICDs) as shown above reinforces the idea of OSINT as collection, not analysis.

In 2006, ICD 301 was drafted in an effort to make OSINT the “INT of first resort.” However, note that the 300 series deals with collection, not analysis (200 series). ICD 301 was a progressive move at the time—it was rescinded in 2012—to nudge along the discipline of OSINT, but the ordering as a 300 series shows that even helpful OSINT moves in the past were viewed through the collection lens. This collection framing undermines the professionalization of OSINT as a real analytic discipline in the long term. Collection is a part of any holistic INT, but not the whole thing in the way that OSINT has been defined. I would add the term collection to the list of the words we need to rethink in the context of OSINT professionalization.

IC as Large Publisher

The US IC is arguably one of the larger publishers in the world measured by the number of analysts. The IC is substantially larger than the reporting arms of the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, Bloomberg News, and CNN combined.^a However, when it comes to doing more OSINT work at greater scale, a common retort is “we don’t have the resources.” This is reflective of the groupthink around classified-first workflows; it is not solely about money. As one of the largest publishing labor forces, the IC has the existing resources to create more quality and shareable OSINT content. It is time to reimagine workflow and labor. Additional funding requests should be pursued after classified-centric workflows have been

a. Judging from various corporate and journalism websites, the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, Bloomberg News, and CNN employ approximately 10,000–13,000 reporters and editorial staff as of early 2024. Conservatively, IC analysts number in the tens of thousands.

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reimagined with OSINT production serving as the base of operations.

Culture is not an Excuse

OSINT, a hot topic within the IC and industry conference circuit for several years, garnered new attention after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Commercial GEOINT, social media, and other open sources created new avenues for open-source analysis. When the question is asked of panel members why OSINT is not the INT as first resort or why OSINT does not receive equal billing with other INTs, the answer typically given is "culture." By this, people seem to mean there's a lack of desire to put unclassified work on a par with traditional, classified work.

The culture argument is too vague, in my view. Instead, the core issues are twofold. First, we lack flagship analytic products. Second, OSINT in the IC is centered within the classified domain, rather than in the unclassified domain where OSINT originates. Let me elaborate.

I posit that creating an ODNI-hosted OSINT product line akin to CIA's WIRE or DIA's *Defense Intelligence Digest* on unclassified networks would help jumpstart broader OSINT professionalization. It would elevate OSINT above just collection, making the unclassified domain the locus of open-source work, focus multi-agency labor against common topics and priorities,

and places leadership at the ODNI level where OSINT professionalization belongs, not buried within other agencies' functions.^a The "INT of first resort" claim would finally be credible.

Building on the first-resort concept, IC research and writing labor would be focused to answer and publish official OSINT reports tackling the intelligence topics with judgements drawn only from unclassified sources.

After this professionalized OSINT output is published, a classified annex can fill any remaining gaps and linked together with registration numbers for pairing and discovery. The official OSINT report version is then distributed to the widest possible audience to include allies and coalition partners on unclassified networks and the classified version is then distributed on classified networks, which reduces exquisite expenditures with OSINT truly leading as the first analytic resort. The reduction in classified research labor would be channeled into unclassified work; classified inputs would be added toward the end of the production process.

This new OSINT report would be a real professionalized INT that can be cross-referenced and cited after going through a professionalized quality control process like the other INTs. OSINT is now co-equal, officially. Fusion or integration is achieved through citation, not nested unofficial collection formats

informing existing classified product lines.

Bigger Silos for OSINT Production

By deliberate design stretching over seven decades, OSINT in the IC has been primarily regarded as an input to classified production, not a coequal. In fact, the majority of IC OSINT functions are housed in collection or technology components, not analytic components. OSINT collection informs classified analysis but is not formally involved in its production. This traditional workflow should be inverted. OSINT collectors, who typically work mostly in the open domain, should start the OSINT production effort with analytic line workers joining them on the unclassified domain to create OSINT-first analysis. This would cluster OSINT expertise together in larger silos and help professionalize OSINT.

Because the analytic product would reside on unclassified domains, the IC could shift workers off of the "high side" (i.e., classified) to the "low side," where most data resides. It would have the added benefit of reducing the amount of work spent verifying or debunking open-source analysis produced outside of the IC. The IC's current classified-first design principles must be reimagined with new design principles, otherwise we will continue to tinker around the edges as we have for decades.

a. Based on my Intelink experience, I posit that substantial OSINT moves should also be protected and grown initially within agency-neutral space under the ODNI.

Tools-driven Discipline and Misaligned Industry Incentives

Viewing OSINT as collection has produced an environment where chasing the latest data-management technology has obscured the focus on analytic fundamentals. Staying current on tools and technology is a large part of any knowledge worker's portfolio, but the focus on tools in the OSINT world seems to top most discussions in OSINT circles when compared to other INT working-group meetings and conferences that are less tools-focused.

Because OSINT in the IC lacks product lines and the number of OSINT practitioners is limited, technology discussions often fill the void. This tech and contracting focus in OSINT is somewhat logical as it can be easier to put millions on contracts to buy services and tools from industry than it is to create or redirect government billets and labor to write narrative intelligence in official channels. However, perpetual outsourcing and chasing the latest technology delay the critical reforms needed for OSINT to professionalize.

The emphasis on collection and tools has also meant that industry

has responded primarily by developing front-end portals aimed to "save time" from "information overload," which has been a sales rallying cry for over 20 years with mixed results. If the IC internally shifts its focus on OSINT toward a full-fledged analytic discipline backed by officially written products, the messaging to industry would change more toward the delivery of fully analyzed and shareable OSINT content rather than collection dashboards, data scraping, or embedding cleared personnel in secure facilities to assist with collection-centric workflows.

Focus on Fundamentals

OSINT is a technical discipline and all practitioners need a high data IQ and must stay current on the evolving tech landscape such as advances in AI. However, buying more AI-fueled tech is like buying a baseball pitching machine when OSINT in the IC cannot hit well off a batting tee. OSINT needs to focus on the fundamentals of professionalization first and then work technological advancements with haste. OSINT fundamentals include creating official product lines, growing the number

of practitioners, founding an OSINT journal, and upskilling the workforce. Some of these fundamentals require tech investments but most are not tech related but desperately needed to truly professionalize OSINT.

In addition, a robust training program focused on creating OSINT analysis should be established to help launch this new OSINT production line. Existing courses on analytic standards, writing, user design, and data science could be consolidated and integrated with private-sector OSINT consulting advice and other IC OSINT creation exemplars to establish a prestigious "schoolhouse."

I ask all readers moving forward to reduce and rethink terms like integration, tipping and cueing, enhancement, foundational, and collection when talking about OSINT. As a community, we need to construct a new vocabulary that matches the goals of making OSINT a real INT that can stand shoulder to shoulder with the other INTs, with official products, analytic disciplines, official citations, professionalized work roles, and even organizational silos.



The author: Chris Rasmussen is a Department of Defense Agency officer and the creator of the public-facing OSINT product platform, www.tearline.mil.