

Sailing the Sea of OSINT in the Information Age

Stephen C. Mercado

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Our age’s increasingly voluminous open-source intelligence (OSINT) sheds light on issues of the day for all-source analysts, covert collectors, and policymakers, but have we done enough to exploit its potential? My short answer is “No,” and here’s why I think so.

Collecting intelligence these days is at times less a matter of stealing through dark alleys in a foreign land to meet some secret agent than one of surfing the Internet under the fluorescent lights of an office cubicle to find some open source. The world is changing with the advance of commerce and technology. Mouse clicks and online dictionaries today often prove more useful than stylish cloaks and shiny daggers in gathering intelligence required to help analysts and officials understand the world. Combined with stolen secrets, diplomatic reports, and technical collection, open sources constitute what one former deputy director of intelligence termed the “intricate mosaic” of intelligence.¹

Today’s commercial and technical advances are only the latest developments in a collection discipline whose pioneers began developing the field in the late

1930s. Building on early work at Princeton University to monitor foreign short-wave radio, the Foreign Broadcast Intelligence Service (FBIS) in 1941 began to turn radio into a primary intelligence source during World War II.² The government did not neglect the printed word either. The Interdepartmental Committee for the Acquisition of Foreign Periodicals (IDC) gathered Axis publications through a global collection network.

The men and women who labored in the OSINT fields of the day produced products that compared well in quantity and quality to those of other agencies that stamped their documents “SECRET.” Dr. Charles B. Fah, writing in mid-1942 as chief of the Far Eastern Section, Office of Strategic Services (OSS), praised the output of FBIS as “indispensable in our work” and “the most extensive single source available” on developments in Japan and occupied Asia. The OSS itself fared less well, failing to establish an agent network in Japan and reporting the fabrications of an Italian “con man” in Rome as

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¹ Russell Jack Smith, *The Unknown CIA: My Three Decades with the Agency* (Washington, DC: Pergamon-Brassey’s, 1989), 195.

² Information on the Princeton Listening Center, launched in 1939, is available at http://libweb.princeton.edu:2003/libraries/firestone/rbsc/finding_aide/plc.html. For a history of FBIS during the Second World War, see Stephen C. Mercado, “FBIS Against the Axis, 1941–1945,” *Studies in Intelligence*, Unclassified Edition no. 11 (Fall-Winter 2001): 33–43.

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its most valuable source on developments in Tokyo.

Publications also held up well against classified reports. John King Fairbank, the Harvard sinologist who led his field in the postwar era, recounted how, after reading an inaccurate and “unintelligent” British report on Japanese shipbuilding, advised Col. William Donovan that better intelligence on the issue would be found in “scrutinizing the Japanese press.” The OSS director evidently found Dr. Fairbank’s brief compelling, for he sent the young academic, literate in Chinese and Japanese, to China to help organize a publications procurement program.³

Navigating Cold War Waters

After the guns of the Second World War fell silent, intelligence officers expert in open sources continued to help analysts and officials navigate the murky waters of the Cold War. For example, analysts in FBIS, whose acronym by then stood for the Foreign Broadcast *Information Service*, and the Foreign Document Division (FDD) led the CIA in detecting the developing

estrangement between Moscow and Beijing. FBIS and FDD officers began discerning signs of the Sino-Soviet split from their readings of propaganda material in the early 1950s. In contrast, some CIA officers from the covert side of the house erred, along with many observers elsewhere, in dismissing as disinformation the open evidence well into the next decade.⁴

Throughout the Cold War, in fact, OSINT constituted a major part of all intelligence on the Soviet Union, China, and other adversaries. OSINT on the Soviet Union, for example, grew from modest beginnings to become the leading source. In the closing years of World War II, intelli-

gence officers searched German, Japanese, and Russian documents in the Army’s Special Documents Section and the joint Army–Navy Washington Document Center for clues to Soviet technical capabilities. By the late 1950s, the CIA and Air Force had discovered a “wealth of information” in the increasing flow of books and periodicals from the Soviet Union.⁵ By the early 1960s, one insider wrote that “In aggregate, open sources probably furnish the greater part of all information used in the production of military intelligence on the Soviet Union.”⁶ By the decade’s end, another wrote of the “tidal wave of publicly printed paper” that both supported and threatened “to swamp” the Intelligence Community. He also offered an example of OSINT’s value: “Intense scrutiny of the North Vietnamese press and radio has been an essential intelligence element in support of [the] US effort” in the Indochina conflict.⁷

It is worth noting in passing that all powers exploited OSINT during World War II and the Cold War. Indeed, our adversaries used technical information from open sources in the United States

³ For Dr. Fah’s comment, see Mercado, 41. On the Italian “confidence trickster” who fooled James Jesus Angleton and other OSS officers, see David Alvarez, *Spies in the Vatican: Espionage and Intrigue from Napoleon to the Holocaust* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 248–53. Regarding Dr. Fairbank’s role in OSS, see John King Fairbank, *Chinabound: A Fifty-Year Memoir* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1983), 174–75.

⁴ The downgrading of the “I” in FBIS from “Intelligence” to “Information” reflects the mistaken notion that only stolen secrets count as intelligence. CIA counterintelligence officers, under the leadership of James Jesus Angleton, were among those in Washington who continued to dismiss the growing evidence of the Sino-Soviet split well into the 1960s. On how OSINT officers led the way in understanding the breakup of “monolithic communism,” see Harold P. Ford, “Calling the Sino-Soviet Split,” *Studies in Intelligence*, Winter 1998–99, Unclassified Edition: 57–71. On Angleton, see also Harold P. Ford, “Why CIA Analysts Were So Doubtful About Vietnam,” *Studies in Intelligence*, Unclassified Edition No. 1 (1997): 88.

⁵ J. J. Bagnall, “The Exploitation of Russian Scientific Literature for Intelligence Purposes,” *Studies in Intelligence* (Summer 1958): 45–49. Declassified article.

⁶ Davis W. Moore, “Open Sources on Soviet Military Affairs,” *Studies in Intelligence* (Summer 1963-declassified article): 101.

⁷ Herman L. Croom, “The Exploitation of Foreign Open Sources,” *Studies in Intelligence* (Summer 1969-declassified article): 129–30.

and other advanced industrial nations to monitor foreign developments and to save time and money on their own projects. The US aerospace publication *Aviation Week*, dubbed “Aviation Leak” for its scoops, was a perennial favorite. The journal was among the US technical periodicals that East German intelligence, among others, translated to monitor current developments in aerospace.⁸

By the Cold War’s end, commercial and technical changes had made evident the value of OSINT. Radio, the cutting edge in the 1930s, remained a key source in the Second World War and the years thereafter. When Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest in 1956, for example, intelligence officers in Washington kept current through radio reports. One veteran of the CIA’s Directorate of Operations (DO), referring to Moscow’s suppression of the Hungarian uprising, wrote: “It is a well-known phenomenon in the field of intelligence that there often comes a time when public political activity proceeds at such a rapid and fulminating pace that secret intelligence, the work of agents, is overtaken by events publicly recorded.”⁹ Some 30

⁸ Joseph Becker, “Comparative Survey of Soviet and US Access to Published Information,” *Studies in Intelligence* (Fall 1957-declassified article): 43; John O. Koehler, *Stasi: The Untold Story of the East German Secret Police* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 110. Becker’s article includes a reference to Soviet reading of *Aviation Week*.

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years later, intelligence officers at Langley and government leaders across the Potomac watched, glued to their television sets, as CNN broadcast the fall of the Berlin Wall.¹⁰

The world today abounds in open information to an extent unimaginable to intelligence officers of the Cold War. When the Soviet Union sent the first man into space in 1961, secretive officials revealed little and lied even about the location of the launch site. In contrast, television reports, Internet sites, and newspaper articles heralded China’s first manned flight into orbit last year. Even intelligence services have emerged from the shadows to some extent. Two journalists caused a stir in 1964 by writing a landmark book on the US Intelligence Community. Today, former

⁹ Peer de Silva, *Sub Rosa: The CIA and the Uses of Intelligence* (New York: Times Books, 1978), 120.

¹⁰ Antonio J. Mendez, with Malcolm McConnell, *The Master of Disguise: My Secret Life in the CIA* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1999), 337. On the monitoring of television in the Cold War, see Maureen Cote, “Veni, Vidi, Vid-Int,” *Studies in Intelligence*, Fall 1990. Unclassified.

case officers recount their clandestine careers.¹¹

OSINT, OSINT Everywhere...

The revolution in information technology, commerce, and politics since the Cold War’s end is only making open sources more accessible, ubiquitous, and valuable. Simply put, one can gather more open intelligence with greater ease and at less cost than ever before. The explosion in OSINT is transforming the intelligence world with the emergence of open versions of the covert arts of human intelligence (HUMINT), overhead imagery (IMINT), and signals intelligence (SIGINT).

The Intelligence Community has seen open sources grow increasingly easier and cheaper to acquire in recent years. The Internet’s development and commercial innovation has given us Web sites, ‘amazon.com,’ and countless other vendors. During the Second World War, Dr. Fairbank traveled far and at great expense to gather Japanese publications in China and send them to Washington. Today, anyone, anywhere, can order Japanese media with a click of the mouse from amazon.co.jp or other online

¹¹ See David Wise and Thomas B. Ross, *The Invisible Government* (New York: Random House, 1964). Notable insider accounts of recent years include Duane “Dewey” Clarridge, *A Spy for All Seasons* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997) and Robert Baer, *See No Evil* (New York: Crown publishers, 2002).

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Open sources increasingly enhance secret collection programs.

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merchants and receive the orders by express air shipment. In the “old days,” not so long ago, academics and analysts made the pilgrimage to Maryland to browse the shelves of Victor Kamkin’s unmatched store for Soviet publications. In the present, one can go on line from the comfort of home to www.kamkin.com to buy from the half million Russian titles in stock or to place a custom order.

Moreover, the IT revolution extends beyond the printed word. More and more local radio and television broadcasts, for example, are found on the World Wide Web. Monitors no longer need to sit close to the broadcast source. Nor do they always need an expensive infrastructure of antennas and other equipment to listen to radio or watch television.

Beyond the usual public media, OSINT is expanding into the areas of HUMINT, IMINT, and SIGINT. In the words of one advocate with experience in both the government and private sector, “OSINT now pervades all of the collection disciplines.” He notes that one can gather intelligence today by overtly tasking collectors to elicit information, ordering commercial satellite imagery, and using software to conduct traffic analysis.¹²

¹² Mark M. Lowenthal, “OSINT: The State of the Art, the Artless State,” *Studies in Intelligence* 45, no. 3 (2001): 62.

IMINT, for example, is becoming such a commercial commodity as to be in danger, in the view of one intelligence expert, of ceasing to be an “INT.” Japan offers a fine demonstration of media exploitation of commercial IMINT. A major magazine known for its focus on North Korea, for example, prominently and frequently displays commercial imagery of such sites as the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon and the alleged residences of leader Kim Chong-il. Journalists combine the IMINT with published defector information, leaks, and other sources to analyze issues. As an example of open IMINT closer to home, the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) used Space Imaging photographs of a DPRK missile site to argue in 2000 that P’yongyang’s missile threat was far less than Washington had claimed. Whatever the merits of the FAS argument, the case underscores the opening of the covert INTs.¹³

Even so, OSINT is no replacement for covert collection. Rather, open sources increasingly enhance secret collection programs. The CIA, NGA, NSA, and other actors on the classified side all benefit from the growing volume of open data serving them as collateral information. Too, OSINT allows covert collectors to marshal limited resources

for the most intractable problems. Digital Globe and Space Imaging will never replace NGA, for example, but government acquisition of their commercial imagery for basic requirements can relieve NGA of mundane tasks and permit it focus on higher priorities.

In addition to their influence on collection disciplines, open sources have long played a major role in covert action. Imperial Japan, for example, employed the German, Alexander von Siebold, to influence foreign opinion in Tokyo’s favor. The agent launched the journal *Ostasien* (East Asia) in 1899 with Japanese backing, contributed favorable articles to the European media, and otherwise worked to shape views on Japan. He also monitored the media, submitting his “Baron von Siebold’s Report on the Press” to inform the Japanese of foreign developments and opinion.¹⁴ In the Cold War, covert organs of the major powers disseminated news and views through front organizations to win hearts and minds. Open sources still constitute the core of political covert

¹³ On IMINT ceasing to be an “INT,” see Gregory F. Treverton, *Reshaping National Intelligence for an Age of Information* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 87. A Japanese magazine notable for its prominent use of commercial IMINT on DPRK pol-mil issues is *SAPIO*, which advertises itself as an “international intelligence magazine.” See *SAPIO*, 8 January 2003, for example, for use of Digital Globe imagery of alleged residences of Kim Chong-il. Regarding the FAS dispute, see *New York Times*, 11 January 2000.

action today, except that overt organizations are often conducting the campaigns.¹⁵

...Surrounding Targets Hard and Soft...

Not only are open sources increasingly accessible, ubiquitous, and valuable, but they can shine in particular against the hardest of hard targets. OSINT is at times the “INT” of first resort, last resort, and every resort in between.

To some, this assertion may represent an overselling of OSINT. Arthur Hulnick, a former CIA officer who went on to teach at Boston University has written about OSINT’s importance: “Neither glamorous nor adventurous, open sources are nonetheless the basic building block for secret intelligence.” He has also noted how OSINT, whether conveyed via FBIS or CNN, provides early

¹⁴ Foreign Ministry Diplomatic Records Office and Nihon Gaikoshi Jiten Editorial Committee, eds., *Nihon Gaikoshi Jiten* [Dictionary of Japanese Diplomatic History] (Tokyo: Yamakawa Shuppansha, 1992), 361. A British historian of Japanese diplomatic history has also written of “indications” that Von Siebold went beyond OSINT for the Japanese Foreign Ministry and Army. Ian Nish, “Japanese Intelligence and the Approach of the Russo-Japanese War,” in Christopher Andrew and David Dilks, eds., *The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 19.

¹⁵ Frederick L. Wetterling, “(C)Overt Action: The Disappearing ‘C,’” *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* (Winter 2003–2004), 566–67.

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warning. He has even estimated that open sources may account for “as much as 80 percent” of the intelligence database in general. Nevertheless, Hulnick has suggested that OSINT would probably be far less useful against such tough cases as North Korea.¹⁶

However, open sources may often be more useful in penetrating closed borders than open societies. Because OSINT is intelligence derived from open sources, fewer sources mean greater coverage is possible with a limited number of monitors. Take the two Koreas, for example. The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), with perhaps the world’s most authoritarian government, is a relatively easy OSINT target. North Korea has only two major daily newspapers: *Nodong Sinmun* and *Minju Choson*, the newspapers of the ruling party and the government, respectively. There is no opposition newspaper in the capital and no lively provincial media to offer competing opinions or expose wrongdoing. The Republic of Korea (ROK), on the other hand,

¹⁶ Arthur S. Hulnick, *Fixing the Spy Machine: Preparing American Intelligence for the Twenty-First Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), 8, 40–41.

has a boisterous press, comprising over a dozen newspapers centered in Seoul, with views spanning the full spectrum of political opinion. Each day brings a flood of government statements, corporate press releases, editorials, scoops, and scandals. In relative terms, monitoring P’yongyang’s media is like sipping through a straw; following Seoul’s open sources is like drinking from a fire hose.

P’yongyang media, while controlled, constitute a valuable resource to anyone seeking to understand the DPRK. More than mere propaganda, as Dr. Wayne Kiyosaki, an expert literate in Korean and well-versed in the media, argued in his study of DPRK foreign relations, P’yongyang’s communications are a tool of mass indoctrination. As such, they provide “a barometer of priorities.”¹⁷ Dr. Adrian Buzo, a former Australian diplomat with the rare experience of residing in P’yongyang, has seconded the value of DPRK media as a “continuing record of the regime’s priorities, of its ideological concerns, and of key personnel changes.” Warning readers against the common trap in the West of dismissing the media “out of hand,” he has advised that “Sustained exposure to the DPRK media is an essential

¹⁷ Wayne S. Kiyosaki, *North Korea’s Foreign Relations: The Politics of Accommodation, 1945–75* (New York, Praeger, 1976), x–xi. Dr. Kiyosaki, a graduate in Korean of the Defense Language Institute who later honed his media insights at FBIS, knew of what he wrote.

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requirement for the would-be analyst, both in itself and as an essential check on the reportage of the DPRK's adversaries.”¹⁸

Finally, continuing with the DPRK as an example, US analysts and policymakers often have little beyond OSINT upon which to base their judgments. The State Department has no embassy in P'yongyang. Few foreigners reside in the capital; even fewer live in the provinces. Opportunities to make contact with the rare North Koreans who reside or travel abroad have been poor. Only the trusted few may make an international telephone call, send a fax, exchange e-mails, or surf the Internet. Such restrictions reduce covert collection opportunities. The open record for HUMINT is telling. Ambassador Donald Gregg, an “Asia hand” whose DO career included a stint in Seoul, has described the DPRK as “one of the longest-running intelligence failures in the history of US espionage.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Adrian Buzo, *The Guerrilla Dynasty: Politics and Leadership in North Korea* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 284–85. On the value of DPRK media in charting personnel changes in P'yongyang, it is worth noting that the standard reference works, such as the annual *North Korea Directory* of Japan's impressive Radiopress and the online biographic compilations of the ROK's National Intelligence Service (www.nis.go.kr) are based on media monitoring. For one journalist's recognition of the value of following P'yongyang's media, see Gordon Fairclough, “To See North Korea, Keep Your Eyes Peeled On the Official Press,” *Wall Street Journal*, 19 February 2004: 1.

Other nations fare no better. One would expect the Japanese, former colonial overlords of Korea for more than 30 years, to accomplish more covert collection against their neighbors than their writings suggest. Tsukamoto Katsuichi, a retired army general with experience as defense attaché in Seoul, has confessed: “No country is as opaque as the DPRK (North Korea). Almost no information leaks out of there. Therefore, we have no choice but to make our judgments based on the little announced in the official newspaper (*Nodong Sinmun*) and radio broadcasts (Korea Central News Agency), as well as a limited number of visitor accounts.”²⁰ A former officer of the Public Security Intelligence Agency (PSIA), Japan's equivalent to the FBI, has also written that analysis of “published materials” is “central” to analyzing the DPRK, given the absence of nearly all else. Such OSINT, he has written, is “more important and

¹⁹ Donald P. Gregg, “A Long Road to P'yongyang,” *The Korea Society Quarterly*, Spring 2002: 7.

²⁰ Tsukamoto Katsuichi, “Kitachosen josei to Higashi Ajia no anzen hoshō” *Securitarian*, July 1995: 22. General Tsukamoto, who began his career as a commissioned officer of the Imperial Japanese Army and finished it as commander of the Ground Self-Defense Force's Western Army, has written several books on Korean security issues.

indispensable than is generally imagined.”²¹

...But Few To Sail the Sea

Today, open source has expanded well beyond “frosting” and comprises a large part of the cake itself. It has become indispensable to the production of authoritative analysis.

—John Gannon, former
Chairman, National Intelligence Council²²

With open sources so accessible, ubiquitous, and valuable, one would expect to see OSINT occupying a commensurately large space within the Intelligence Community. This is not the case. Too many people still reject OSINT as intelligence. Worse, too few are able to gather and exploit open sources. Worst of all, the Intelligence Community assigns only a handful of those capable people to the task.

Too many people still mistake secrets for intelligence. The enduring popularity of the fictional James Bond bears much of the blame, perhaps, for the misperception outside of the Intelligence Community that a

²¹ Noda Hironari (pseud.), *CIA supai kenshu: Aru Koan Chosakan no taikenki* [CIA Spy Training: One PSIA Officer's Account] (Tokyo: Gendai Shokan, 2000): 169–170. It is interesting to note that PSIA changed its English name, but not its acronym, in 2003, replacing “Investigation” with “Intelligence.”

²² John Gannon, “The Strategic Use of Open-Source Information,” *Studies in Intelligence* 45, no. 3 (2001): 67.

tuxedo, pistol, and charm are the main tools of intelligence gathering. Even some insiders err in believing intelligence to be identical with covert sources and methods. The following opinion of a retired DO officer is typical: “Despite frequent references to ‘open source intelligence,’ within the CIA this term is somewhat of an oxymoron. By definition, intelligence is clandestinely acquired information—stolen, to put it bluntly. Information from a magazine, a television broadcast, or someone’s newsletter may be valuable, but it is not intelligence.”²³

More than 40 years after Sherman Kent, the CIA’s father of intelligence analysis, persuasively argued that intelligence is knowledge, some still confuse the method with the product. Sadly, such confusion is widespread. As one DPRK watcher noted: “Much of the best political intelligence comes from careful culling of public sources, like reading reports in the North Korean media, but within the intelligence community this source is not considered as reliable as more esoteric technical means, like satellite photography and communications intercepts, or spies.”²⁴ However, as a staff director of the House Permanent

²³ Thomas Patrick Carroll, “The Case Against Intelligence Openness,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence* (Winter 2001–2002): 561.

²⁴ Leon V. Sigal, *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy With North Korea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 234.

Select Committee on Intelligence (HPSCI) once explained to a deputy director of operations, “We don’t give you brownie points for collecting intelligence by the hardest means possible.”²⁵

A few examples should suffice to support Kent’s definition of intelligence:

- An intelligence officer would likely have received high marks for stealing a map of the Khabarovsk area of the Soviet Far East in 1988. Drawn at a scale of 1:10,000 and running to 80 pages, the map of the General Staff’s Military Topographic Headquarters would have taken a classified stamp and stayed within a secure vault, available only to those with a need to know. The map, published in 1998 and advertised as the first of this scale declassified in Russia, is for sale today.²⁶
- Stanislav Levchenko, a KGB officer working under cover as a reporter in Japan, defected to the United States in 1979. In 1983, a Japanese journalist

²⁵ Sherman Kent, *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949). There is no more succinct definition of intelligence than the title of Part I: “Intelligence Is Knowledge.” For the HPSCI staff director’s remark, see Mark M. Lowenthal, “Open Source Intelligence: New Myths, New Realities,” *Defense Daily Online*, reprinted in *The Intelligenceer* (Winter 1999): 7.

²⁶ This and many other declassified Russian maps have been advertised on line at East View Information Services of Minneapolis, MN (www.eastview.com).

conducted more than 20 hours of interviews with him, during which the former operative named agents and discussed tradecraft. The resulting book and Levchenko’s press conferences were, according to a US intelligence officer, more revealing than his CIA debriefing.²⁷

- On 7 June 1942, the day after the US “miracle” at Midway due to the top-secret breaking of Japanese communications, the *Chicago Tribune* trumpeted on its front page that the US Navy had known of Japanese plans “several days before the battle began.” A Japanese officer reading that newspaper probably would have grasped that the naval codes were insecure.²⁸

Information openly acquired, whether open from the start (say,

²⁷ Levchenko’s interviews, which appeared in abbreviated form in a series running in the Japanese weekly magazine *Shukan Bunshun* over five weeks in mid-1983, were issued later that year as a book. Shukan Bunshun, ed. *Refuchenko wa shogen suru* [Levchenko Testifies] (Tokyo: Bungei Shunju, 1983). Haruna Mikio, a former Washington bureau chief of Japan’s Kyodo News Agency with extensive contacts in the US Intelligence Community, wrote that an unidentified CIA officer was “surprised” at how much more detailed he found Levchenko’s public revelations. See Haruna Mikio, *Himitsu no fairu: CIA no tainichi kosaku* [Secret Files: The CIA’s Operations Against Japan] (Tokyo: Shinchosha Bunko, 2003), volume 2, 483. Whatever the accuracy of Haruna’s purported source, Levchenko’s Japanese book is more revealing than the one he published in the United States: *On the Wrong Side: My Life in the KGB* (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey’s, 1988).

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**Even the Internet fails
the monolingual
American.**

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a telephone book), declassified, or leaked, is intelligence when assessed and disseminated appropriately.²⁹ History abounds with examples of OSINT collection by intelligence officers:

- Military attachés have long attached magazine photographs of aircraft, ships, and tanks to their classified reports.
- Japan's Kempeitai in wartime Shanghai gathered the writings of Agnes Smedley and Edgar Snow in the course of collecting intelligence on the Chinese Communist Party.³⁰
- Various services culled intelligence from the pages of the Soviet military daily *Krasnaya*

²⁸ "Navy Had Word of Jap Plan To Strike at Sea," *Chicago Tribune*, 7 June 1942. On the "miraculous" character of the victory, see Gordon Prange *et al.*, *Miracle at Midway* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982).

²⁹ Intelligence officers have long worried about the damage done through the leaks of classified intelligence and even the gathering of published information by adversaries. Leaks are an old problem. See, for example, Allen Dulles, *The Craft of Intelligence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 241–43. On leaks today, see James B. Bruce, "The Consequences of Permissive Neglect," *Studies in Intelligence* 47, no. 3 (2003, Unclassified). Becker, "Comparative Survey," 35, noted in 1957 Soviet exploitation of US open sources and the repeated failures of the US Government from the 1940s to find a solution to the problem.

³⁰ Tsukamoto Makoto, *Aru joho shoko no shuki* [Memoirs of an Intelligence Officer] (Tokyo: Chuo Bunko, 1998), 195. Agnes Smedley (*China's Red Army Marches*, 1934) and Edgar Snow (*Red Star Over China*, 1938) were prolific American writers with extraordinary access to Chinese communists.

Zvezda (Red Star), including the wartime Imperial Japanese Army's Harbin Special Services Agency and the postwar US Intelligence Community.³¹

Beyond the persistent dismissal of open sources as intelligence, the US Intelligence Community suffers from America's general indifference to foreign languages and ideas. Any intelligence agency reflects the society from which it comes. Americans, living in a vast country and speaking a language that has become the world's *lingua franca*, show little interest in learning other languages or, indeed, knowing what those outside their borders think. The result is an Intelligence Community recruiting officers from among a relatively small pool of Americans who, through immigration or education, possess the expertise in foreign languages and area studies required for collecting open sources.

Knowing foreign languages is the key to exploiting OSINT. An account with LexisNexis and a subscription to the *Wall Street Journal* are hardly sufficient.

³¹ Nakano Koyukai, ed., *Rikugun Nakano Gakko* [Army Nakano School] (Tokyo: Nakano Koyukai, 1978), 176, and Moore, "Open Sources," 104.

English is declining from the world's dominant language to merely "first among equals."³² Even the Internet fails the monolingual American. Chinese is slated to surpass English as the Internet's leading language in the near future.³³ Domain names, once issued only in English or other languages with Roman letters, increasingly appear in Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, Korean, and other non-alphabet languages. Put simply, English is best for monitoring nations where English is used. But what intelligence challenges confront the United States in Australia, Britain, Canada, Ireland, or New Zealand? On the contrary, languages with which Americans are least familiar are precisely those of countries of greatest concern: Arabic (Iraq), Chinese (China), Farsi (Iran), Korean (DPRK), and Pashto (Afghanistan), to name only some examples.

Although facing such challenges, the United States lacks the education base upon which to develop tomorrow's intelligence officers. Relatively few Americans pursue a foreign language from secondary school through the university level. Worse, most university language students still study the Romance tongues or German in courses designed

³² David Graddol, "The Future of Language," *Science* 303 (27 February 2004): 1329–31.

³³ The prediction on Chinese Internet was made at a conference of the World Intellectual Property Organization, according to the *Financial Times*, 7 December 2001.

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chiefly to produce professors of literature. The Intelligence Community must then compete with the private sector for the handful of competent linguists graduating from university. The bleak alternative is to start adults on crash courses at the Defense Language Institute (DLI) or elsewhere on some of the world's most difficult languages.

On a related issue, an indifference to foreign languages and even foreign sources in translation diminishes the OSINT value of the US mass media. American journalists on the whole have been ignorant of the countries on which they have reported. Most who have covered the nuclear dispute between P'yongyang and Washington, for example, cannot read a Korean restaurant menu, let alone the pages of *Nodong Sinmun*. Worse, as one observer noted of an earlier period of crisis: "Reporters did not routinely read translations of the North Korean news by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service. Nor did they avail themselves of information circulating among outside experts by e-mail and fax."³⁴ The resulting level of reporting has been so poor that one prominent academic who can read Korean wrote recently of having to turn to P'yongyang's "tightly controlled press" for information on Washington-P'yongyang relations.³⁵

³⁴ Sigal, *Disarming Strangers*, 221

³⁵ Bruce Cumings, *North Korea: Another Country* (New York: New Press, 2004), 47–48.

The reluctance of US publishers to introduce foreign books in translation further lessens the flow of open sources available to Americans. For example, ROK movie star Ch'oe Un-hui and her former husband, the director Sin Sang-ok, gained extraordinary access to Kim Chong-il after he kidnapped them in 1978 in a bid to upgrade P'yongyang's film industry; they worked for him until their escape in 1986. Their account of the Dear Leader, complete with photographs, appeared in 1988 in Seoul and Tokyo. They were for years the only outsiders who had known Kim and written of their experience, but no American publisher saw fit to issue the book in translation. The same is true of numerous books in recent years from other insiders, including the architect of DPRK ideology and Kim's private sushi chef.³⁶

³⁶ The architect of North Korea's Chuch'e philosophy, Hwang Chang-yop, has written a number of books, including *Na nun yoksa ui chilli rul poatta: Hwang Chang-yop hoegorok* [I Saw the Truth of History: Memoirs of Hwang Chang-yop] (Seoul: Hanul, 1999). A Japanese sushi chef in Kim's service, publishing under the pseudonym Kenji Fujimoto, wrote *Kin Seinichi no ryorinin* (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 2003). These are two of many insider accounts likely never to see the light of day in the United States.

An example closer to home is that of Dr. Emmanuel Todd's *After the Empire: The Breakdown of the American Order*. Published originally in 2003 in French, the book appeared the same year in various languages, including German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, and Spanish. The belated appearance a year later of the American edition of a book regarding what a prominent academic—who had forecast in 1976 the eventual fall of the Soviet Union—sees as Washington's futile struggle to maintain a global hegemony stands as an indictment of the US publishing industry.³⁷

Compounding the problem of insufficient foreign information reaching the United States, the decline of area studies since the Cold War's end has reduced the pool of able applicants prepared to exploit foreign information in the vernacular. Russian studies, for example, have suffered grievously in funding and enrollment. Many graduates have found that US businesses prefer to send monolingual accountants to Moscow to teaching a Russian expert accounting. Area experts seeking university tenure find positions going to political scientists churning out papers on "rational choice" regarding countries they

³⁷ Emmanuel Todd, *After the Empire: The Breakdown of the American Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), *Après l'empire: Essai sur la décomposition du système américain* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003) and *La Chute finale: Essai sur la décomposition de la sphère soviétique* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1976).

know hardly at all. Students attending courses of area studies today are more often seeking their ethnic roots than preparing to join the Intelligence Community. For example, a German professor teaching Korean political economy at a time of high military tension between Washington and P'yongyang found that around three quarters of his students at Columbia University were Asians or Asian-Americans. He wrote, "I was astonished by the relative lack of interest in Korea among American students, especially in such a tense situation as at present, when only deep knowledge about modern Korea can help prevent potentially disastrous policy decisions."³⁸

All of this would be bad enough, but even worse is the fact that only a handful of capable officers with language and area skills are casting their nets into the global sea of open sources for intelligence. The results have been catastrophic. In the words of one former DO officer who has argued that "covert collectors should not be blamed" for missing Usama Bin Laden: "It is virtually impossible to penetrate a revolutionary terrorist organization, particularly one structured and manned the way

al-Qa'ida is. The responsibility falls on the intelligence community's overt collectors and analysts." He suggests that the information was out there, but that analysts were simply not reading the relevant foreign media. The same lack of OSINT exploitation, he asserts, was also behind Washington's failure to comprehend the rise to power of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran a quarter century ago.³⁹ Two senior CIA officers warn that things are likely to grow worse. They note how "knowledge of culture, history, and language will be even more critical as the amount of open-source material increases." They also admit that, "Inadequate American foreign language skills are a mismatch for the exponential growth in foreign language materials."⁴⁰

Building a New "Craft" of Intelligence

"The collection of foreign intelligence is accomplished in a variety of ways, not all of them either mysterious or secret. This is particularly true of overt intelligence, which is

information derived from newspapers, books, learned and technical publications, official reports of government proceedings, radio and television. Even a novel or play may contain useful information about the state of a nation."

—Allen Dulles, *The Craft of Intelligence*⁴¹

The words of the former director of central intelligence (DCI) seem even more true today than when he published them over 40 years ago, but the Intelligence Community needs to build a better ship to sail the sea of open sources. FBIS, the largest and best equipped of the disorganized collection of offices engaged in OSINT, is too small a craft with too few hands to navigate the waters and harvest the catch. Analysts, by and large, lack the knowledge of foreign languages, media expertise, and time to do their own fishing.

What is to be done?

First, the DCI should increase the number of language officers

³⁸ Constantine Pleshakov, "Russian Studies: A Sinking Academic Atlantis," *Japan Times*, 15 March 1995: 17. Dr. Ruediger Frank of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin noted the general lack of interest in "An Interview with a Visiting Lecturer," *Annual Report 2002-2003*, Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University, 21.

³⁹ Robert D. Chapman, "The Muslim Crusade," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* (Winter 2002-2003): 613-14.

⁴⁰ Aris A. Pappas and James M. Simon, Jr., "The Intelligence Community: 2001-2015," *Studies in Intelligence* 46, no. 1 (2002): 45. For a view of how deficiencies in foreign languages hurt covert collection, see Matthew M. Aid, "All Glory Is Fleeting: SIGINT and the Fight Against International Terrorism," *Intelligence and National Security* 18, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 100-102.

⁴¹ Allen Dulles, *The Craft of Intelligence* (New York: Harper&Row, 1963), 55. For a similar view, see Robert D. Steele, *The New Craft of Intelligence: Personal, Public, Political* (Oakton, VA: OSS International Press, 2002). For those interested in a concrete example of literature serving as a guide to intelligence, see how poems in the DPRK literary journal *Choson Munhak* [Korean Literature] signaled the preparation of Kim Chong-il to succeed his father. Morgan E. Clippinger, "Kim Chong-il in the North Korean Mass Media: A Study of Semi-Esoteric Communication," *Asian Survey* (March 1981): 291.

at FBIS. Officers with knowledge of foreign languages, countries, and media are necessary to gather and analyze open sources, as photo interpreters are required to make sense of satellite imagery. The sea of open sources is arguably as large as that of covert communications, so one could argue that there should be as many open source officers surfing the Web as there are signals intelligence officers breaking secure communications. Required are college scholarships for students literate in Chinese and other innovative means of enlarging the pool of future OSINT officers.

Second, the Intelligence Community should take steps to turn the motley group of OSINT units into an organized fleet, with FBIS as the flagship. At a minimum, the Intelligence Community would do well to designate FBIS as the coordinator for OSINT. An enhanced FBIS could build on its expertise, its databases, and its longstanding role of serving the entire Intelligence Community by coordinating the output from the various embassy press translation units, military gray literature collectors, and such.

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An alternate, and more ambitious, plan would be to build a central agency for open intelligence based on FBIS. The new organization would be for OSINT what the DO is for HUMINT, National Reconnaissance Office is for IMINT, and the National Security Agency is for SIGINT.⁴²

Third, the Intelligence Community must organize its own technical resources and tap those of the private sector to exploit the latest information technology for OSINT collection, analysis, production, and dissemination. OSINT collectors, all-source analysts, and others would benefit from smarter search engines, enhanced machine-assisted translation software, and better tools for incorporating audio and

video streams into intelligence reports.

Above all, the Intelligence Community requires a sustained approach to open sources. As with other collection disciplines, one cannot conjure OSINT programs out of thin air. Assembling a substantial number of officers competent in Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, Korean, and other languages and expert in fishing in the OSINT seas, then giving them the sources and methods to do their work, would be no small feat.

⁴² Creating a central OSINT agency is far from a novel idea. The proposal surfaced, for example, in *Studies in Intelligence* in 1969. See Croom, “Exploitation,” 135.

