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The Importance of Open Source Intelligence to the Military

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Although Open Source Intelligence (OSINT or OSCINT) always has existed, the information revolution now provides citizens, intelligence analysts, and government officials with easy access to an enormous volume of information, data that was gathered and manipulated at great expense only by government agencies just a few short decades ago. Steele describes various types of information available on the World Wide Web and explains how these sources can be exploited by intelligence organizations to supplement the classified information they traditionally rely upon as a basis for their estimates.

Open Source Intelligence (OSCINT) is based on information which can be obtained legally and ethically from public sources.

OSCINT is both a force multiplier and a resource multiplier. It provides a practical political and military advantage which complements traditional intelligence. Available at low cost, it cannot be ignored.

Available for the Taking

The Intelligence Community's official definition of OSCINT is:

By Open Source we refer to publicly available information appearing in print or electronic form. Open Source information may be transmitted through radio, television, and newspapers, or it may be distributed by commercial databases, electronic mail networks, or portable electronic media such as CD-ROMs. It may be disseminated to a broad public, as are the mass media or to a more select audience, such as gray literature,

which includes conference proceedings, company shareholder reports, and local telephone directories. Whatever form it takes, Open Source involves no information that is: classified at its origin; is subject to proprietary constraints (other than copyright); is the product of sensitive contacts with U.S. or foreign persons or is acquired through clandestine or covert means.¹

This official definition is limited in its understanding to standard commercial sources of traditional information, and excludes, to take one important example, SPOT imagery. It also fails to take into account the importance of unpublished materials, including electronic information and human knowledge, which can be accessed legally and ethically.

The official approach to OSCINT is also limited in that the existing information-handling architectures for military intelligence processing, including dissemination to the commander, are all classified. There is presently a very limited capability for routing unclassified information efficiently, even assuming it can be obtained. The apparent reluctance to assume primary responsibility for the collection and processing of OSCINT might also explain why military operators in the United States and the United Kingdom are examining means of acquiring and exploiting OSCINT directly, bypassing the intelligence community in order to give action officers at the policy level, and commanders at the operational level, direct access to OSCINT.

Experienced intelligence professionals have found that while OSCINT is not a substitute for traditional intelligence disciplines—including Human Intelligence, Imagery Intelligence, and Signals Intelligence—it does offer three major advantages for planning and conducting military operations:

- (1) When encountering requirements for military operations in the Third World, or in support of humanitarian assistance and counterterrorist operations for which intelligence collection priorities have not been high, OSCINT is frequently the only discipline able to respond rapidly (to include commercial imagery). It provides the commander and his staff with a rapid orientation adequate for both developing initial planning packages, and for establishing collection requirements for the traditional intelligence disciplines.
- (2) OSCINT is also a means of achieving significant savings, in that many essential elements of information required by the commander and his staff can be acquired from commercial sources at a lower cost, in less time, than from classified capabilities, with the added advantages that OSCINT is often more up to date, and