Enabling Front-line Open-Source Intelligence Operations

By Mark R. Quantock

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Importance of Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT)

In the 2021 CSIS report "Maintaining the Intelligence Edge[1]", Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines and a board of senior, highly respected former Intelligence officials, called for OSINT to be elevated "as a core 'INT'"- on par with the other Intelligence disciplines. Further, their "Key Findings" highlighted that, "there is no shortage of opportunities to apply technology across intelligence missions today." Nowhere is this truer than with respect to leveraging OSINT and enabling the OSINT force with the ability to realize their potential. Indeed, the technical enablement of OSINT professional force is long overdue.

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As an emerging intelligence discipline, it should be a surprise to no one that OSINT has many on-going challenges (policy, training, budgets, definitions, standards, etc.). But like the stand-up and integration of any new concept into operations, the challenges should be worked aggressively and concurrently. With regard to technically enabling the OSINT workforce, our current approach has unfortunately been both plodding and risk averse.

The Technical Challenge

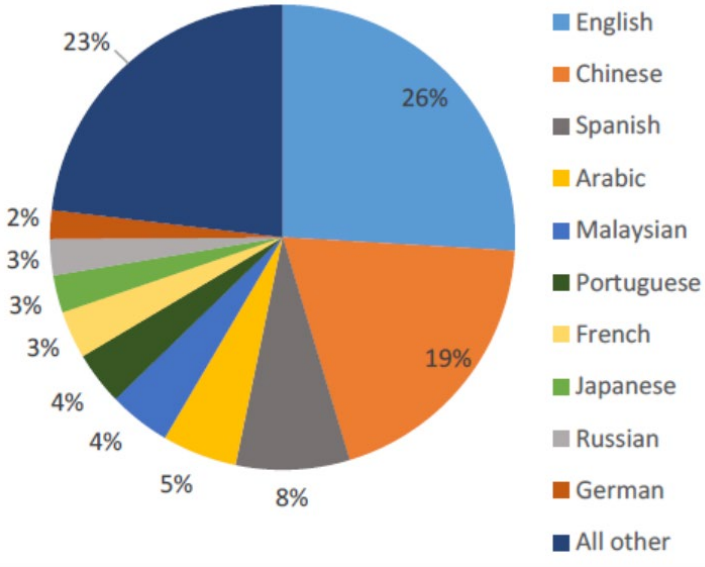
The vast majority of OSINT practitioners and professionals today are hobbled by inadequate OSINT tools and anemic data access. For example, alerting tools (writ large), and social media collection tools that only draw from a small number of data sources, are wholly inadequate.

OSINT analysts require the ability to persistently collect and dynamically adjust collection - not simply sit at the end of a stilted alerting tool. Moreover, they must be able to draw upon and select from the breadth of global data sources (both publicly and commercially available information). They cannot be encumbered by foreign language hurdles (nearly 75% of the internet is now in a language other than English) nor should they be denied advanced AI/ML capabilities that are extant and readily available in the commercial space - capabilities that our adversaries can and do leverage.

OSINT professionals must be empowered with access to sophisticated social media exploration platforms. They should also have social network analysis (SNA) and commercial telemetry data (CTD or AdTech) as part of their collection and analytical arsenal. Furthermore, they should have the ability to port their collection via a cross-domain solution that integrates publicly and commercially available information (PAI/CAI) with closed or classified data/sources. Ideally, this is all delivered via a single pane of glass so operators and analysts don't have to toggle between systems.

The good news is that this capability exists!

> 74% of the internet is in a language other than English[2]



Sources:

[1] "Maintaining the Intelligence Edge" was a report produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in 2021. The full report can be viewed here.

[2] Internet World Stats

Required Tools for OSINT Success

Intelligence professionals need unabridged access to the advantages modern technology provides through an advanced set of tools. A full suite of AI-powered OSINT capabilities enables these professionals to truly harness to power of publicly and commercially available information for their mission-critical work.

Advanced Social Media Capability

At the absolute minimum, analysts must have a social media exploitation capability that is AI-enabled and transforms publicly/commercially available information across the world's languages (more than 200) into enriched, relevant, and translated insights on a single pane of glass for analysis and collaboration across teams. The platform should be fed by billions of top-level domains drawn from both mainstream and relevant, obscure data sources. The solution should be able to assign and chart sentiment for social media in the major world languages. Furthermore, it must be able to identify themes, entities, and categories, as well as detect relationships, all within a cloud-based environment.

Social Network Analysis (SNA)

Foundational to OSINT analysts is the ability to leverage an AI-enabled capability that empowers teams to visualize unstructured and relationship data to understand key connections between subjects and topics of interest, including influencers with the greatest potential to impact organizations, senior leaders, and world events.

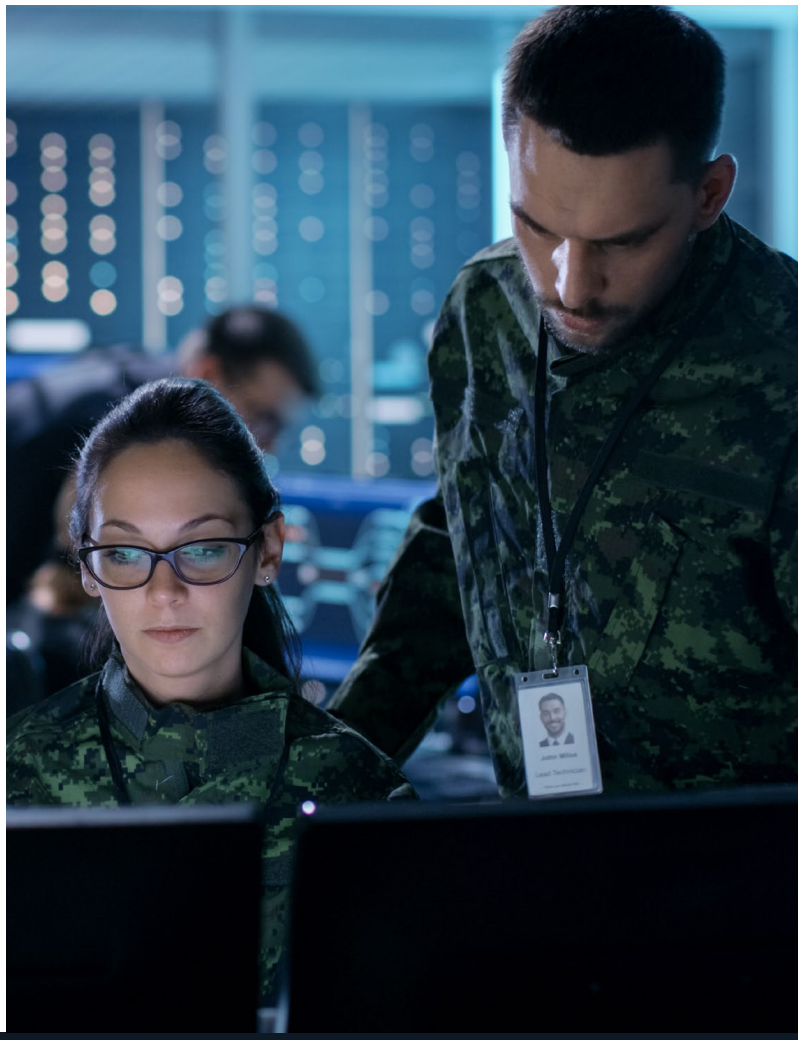
Commercial Telemetry Data

Adversaries and malevolent actors often operate and hide in plain sight. With appropriate mission focus and proper authorities, Intelligence professionals require an ability to track and geolocate suspected bad actors. Big data, advanced technologies and algorithms can enable the geolocation of digital devices by leveraging publicly and commercially available information to provide authorities the ability to track and/or interdict suspect devices.

Knowledge Visualization & Collaboration

Exploitation and data tools are of little value if analysts cannot visualize results and collaborate with teammates. An ideal OSINT platform supports a single log-in; customized searches that support Boolean logic, across a variety of data sources; documents standardization; has inherent managed attribution; supports customizable visualization and advanced analysis by sentiment, volume, authors, languages or trends; supports shared collaboration within and across teams or organizations; and supports accessibility across dashboards, desktops, and mobile applications.

Analysts and OSINT professionals should be able to explore all of this data through a wide range of analytical lenses to include geospatial, temporal, link analysis, public records search, sentiment, and topics of interest. And users should be able to set custom alerts for topics or activity of interest, all while accessing the platform 24/7/365 from any computer, device, or smartphone with an internet connection and a web browser. This allows analysts and teams to gain insights quickly, review actionable data, and report on the information that matters most – all tailored to answer the specific questions that support their mission needs.



Putting the Mission Back in Focus

Our OSINT professionals require and deserve technical capabilities that allow them to execute the tasks we've asked them to perform. Be it event detection, crisis management, targeting, screening, counterintelligence, insider threat or any of the myriad use cases we've asked them to execute, they must be enabled to properly prosecute their mission.

We certainly don't limit Signals Intelligence professionals to archaic collection technology, or Geospatial Intelligence professionals to 1960s imagery light tables – yet we often hamstring our Open-Source Intelligence professionals with inadequate capabilities. It's past time to arm them with the technology that will enhance, not detract, from their ability to perform their mission.

While any reasonable person would agree that empowering the very people who keep us safe is a priority, it's easy to lose sight of that mandate when talking about emerging technologies and the nuts and bolts of innovative new software. Ultimately, it's incumbent upon leaders to keep the focus on the mission. These tools are now readily available to support the mission. Protracted evaluation in board rooms can't replace evaluation of their utility in real-world environments. It's time to empower Open-Source Intelligence professionals with this technology and evaluate their utility by way of real-world outcomes.

Major General (Ret) Mark Quantock is a retired Army Intelligence Officer who served as the Director of Intelligence (J2) for US Central Command from 2016-17. In his 37-year military career, he served four combat tours in Kuwait, Iraq and Afghanistan, and was the Director of Intelligence for US and coalition forces in Afghanistan from 2015-16. MG Quantock is Executive Vice President, Strategic Accounts at Babel Street.

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