OSINT AIDS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST OPIOIDS

Open-source intelligence and artificial intelligence are emerging as force multipliers in countering narcotics trafficking

By Mohamad "Moe" El-Hamalawy

Deaths from opioids are at epidemic levels. More than 1,500 Americans die per week from opioid overdoses, making it the leading cause of death in the U.S. for adults age 18 to 45, according to the Council on Foreign Relations.

This situation is a domestic issue with international ties and a complicated supply chain that brings opioids into the country through various vectors. It is walked across borders by human smugglers; it is imported via auto, rail, and plane in seemingly legal cargo; and it is even express-shipped via legitimate carriers.

Border patrol and other agents can't open every package delivered to a U.S. location, nor should they. The handling of synthetic opioids in their concentrated form—namely fentanyl—is extremely hazardous and capable of causing death through contact or inhalation, posing a real threat to law enforcement personnel.

As a result, federal, local, state, and tribal law enforcement agencies must turn to other ways to identify and track shipments and narcotics activity. They are increasingly tapping a powerful tool that harnesses worldwide open-source intelligence (OSINT).

OSINT is produced by collecting and analyzing publicly accessible information (PAI) to support investigative practices. Its use against narcotics trafficking is seen as a force multiplier that augments agent and officer capabilities to support analysis at a speed and scale beyond human capacity.

MAXIMIZING OPERATIONAL STRENGTH

Those on the front lines of counter-narcotics activity recognize that technology and data must be part of the solution. Accessing and analyzing PAI can play a crucial role due

monitoring these sources, OSINT allows law enforcement to stay informed about current events, emerging threats, and trends that may impact local jurisdictions so officers can make informed decisions in real time based on the most up-to-date information available.

- **Multilingual comprehension.** Narcotics trafficking often originates outside the U.S., and communications and transactions take place in numerous languages. When combined with technology that can discover and retrieve relevant documents across hundreds of languages with cultural context, OSINT can translate important information for use in investigations.

- **Information-sharing and collaboration.** The counter-narcotics fight must encompass the joint efforts of federal, state, tribal, and local law enforcement agencies. Unfortunately, issues with information-sharing often hinder a coordinated, collaborative effort. Since OSINT leverages publicly available information that is nonclassified, it eliminates a significant barrier to information-sharing.

OSINT BEST PRACTICES

Law enforcement should observe several best practices when using artificial intelligence and OSINT technology.

First, look for solutions that minimize the onus on operational and frontline staff. OSINT solutions available as a software as a service deployment can help teams avoid time-consuming and complicated software installs, patches, and upgrades, and start using the technology—and realizing its benefits—quickly.

As with any software solution, usability is key. Depending on the goals of the program, organizations can expect to begin using the technology in as little as 15 minutes after onboarding and training. Properly trained users can learn to expand and flex their expertise within hours.

Every law enforcement tool must be suited to its mission, and OSINT is no exception. Therefore, agencies must ensure their use of OSINT is in accordance with policy and privacy guidelines. OSINT solutions can be "tuned" to match the legal and privacy framework of the organization while adhering to data governance best practices such as state-level privacy regulations, international privacy laws such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation, and other federal and local laws.

WORKING TOWARD SAFER COMMUNITIES

In the fight against the opioid epidemic, using technology through the integration of PAI and OSINT has emerged as a quintessential force multiplier. With it, law enforcement gains access to vast amounts of data, comprehensive analysis, pattern recognition, and predictive analytics.

All of this equips officers with the situational awareness needed to stay ahead of drug traffickers at every level of operations. In harnessing this technology, law enforcement agencies are enhancing their effectiveness.

> ## Those on the front lines of counter-narcotics activity recognize that technology and data must be part of the solution.

At the end of the day, the goal is to curtail the distribution of fentanyl and other illicit drugs so we can have safer, healthier communities. By detecting previously unknown delivery avenues or identifying facilities and transport vectors used in trafficking, law enforcement can break up trafficking rings and stem the tide of opioid distribution, use, and overdose deaths. ⬟

Mohamad "Moe" El-Hamalawy is senior vice president of fedciv, borders, and automation at Babel Street, a technology partner in advanced identity intelligence and risk operations. Before joining Babel Street in 2018, El-Hamalawy served in management positions at STG, including as a task area manager for the Department of Homeland Security's Office for Bombing Prevention.

to the potential to analyze vast amounts of data, identify patterns, predict trends, and provide insights for more effective prevention, detection, and response strategies. These abilities empower officers and agents to do more by giving them the tools to focus and coordinate efforts for greater impact.

OSINT technology assists with the following:

- **Situational awareness.** Access to OSINT enhances situational awareness by gathering and analyzing PAI from various sources, including social media, news reports, and government websites. By