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## INTelligence: Open Source Intelligence

*The president and policymakers rely on insights from the Central Intelligence Agency to inform their foreign policy decisions. CIA officers use a variety of sources in formulating their assessments. The following article is the first in a series that will explore different sources and collection disciplines, which are the building blocks of what we call “finished intelligence.” This article will focus on open source intelligence.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Information does not have to be secret to be valuable. Whether in the blogs we browse, the broadcasts we watch, or the specialized journals we read, there is an endless supply of information that contributes to our understanding of the world. The Intelligence Community generally refers to this information as Open Source Intelligence (OSINT). OSINT plays an essential role in giving the national security community as a whole insight and context at a relatively low cost.

OSINT is drawn from publicly available material, including:

- The Internet
- Traditional mass media (e.g. television, radio, newspapers, magazines)
- Specialized journals, conference proceedings, and think tank studies
- Photos
- Geospatial information (e.g. maps and commercial imagery products)

## **The DNI Open Source Center**

CIA is responsible for collecting, producing, and promoting open source intelligence through its management of the DNI Open Source Center (OSC). OSC was established on November 1, 2005 in response to recommendations by the Robb-Silberman Commission, and is charged with a unique, Community-wide responsibility.

OSC and its worldwide network of partners have the skills, tools, and access necessary to produce high-quality open source intelligence. These capabilities include translations in over 80 languages; source, trends, and media analyses; specialized video and geospatial services; and rare cultural and subject matter expertise.

To OSC Director Douglas Naquin strong partnerships are absolutely essential.

“Given the variety and scope of the questions we can address through publicly available information, I believe it is incumbent on us to work across organizations — inside and outside government — to make the most effective use of available expertise and capability. We in OSC focus on comparative advantage: If we find an organization or company that can do something particularly well — for example, translations — we will leverage that advantage to the extent we can, allowing us then to focus our resources on what we do best.”

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## Mission

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) is an independent US Government agency responsible for providing national security intelligence to senior US policymakers.

To learn more, visit [CIA Vision, Mission & Values](#).

## Answering New Questions

OSINT has always been an important part of all-source analysis, but continuing advances in information technology have given a voice to even larger numbers of people and made it possible to address new intelligence questions.

“For example, open sources can tell us how various groups overseas react to a speech by the president,” Naquin said. “We don’t have to settle for the ‘official’ view but can assess various groups’ perceptions as well as track trends over time.”

“Just because open source is ‘free’ or publicly available doesn’t mean it is easy,” Naquin added. To filter, understand, and analyze the enormous amount of material that comes into OSC 24/7, Open Source Officers (OSO) must be fluent in foreign languages, sensitive to cultural nuances, experts in their field, whether video, geospatial tools, media analysis or library science.

“If a government changes its stance toward the United States, an analyst with a thorough understanding of the language and familiarity with the culture might not only be able to forecast this change but can tell us why,” Naquin said. “The ability to combine foreign language skill, cultural knowledge, and advanced search techniques is not common.”

Policymakers and other government officials also rely on that expertise to gain a good picture of countries they plan to visit.

“They want to know the environment and various players before they visit,” Naquin said. “Not just guidebook information, but details that will help make their visits fruitful. It’s surprising what one can find in open sources if one knows where to look.”

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## Unique Analysis

OSC makes most of the information it collects and processes available both to the Intelligence Community and to the entire U.S. Government. Beyond making this “raw” data available to their all-source counterparts, OSC analysts identify and flag for others new insights or trends from open sources.

An experienced OSO is attuned to changes in tone, word choice, and syntax in official messages from foreign governments and organizations. Comparisons with past statements can provide insights into how the foreign actors view an incident or issue. The analysis can also help identify their “hot buttons” or “red lines.”

## **Challenges and Opportunities**

As with all intelligence disciplines, OSINT has its challenges. The sheer volume is daunting, and separating wheat from chaff requires skill, knowledge, and a reliance on sophisticated information technology. It also takes a concerted effort to coordinate with partners to avoid duplication and make the best use of resources, but the payoff in both effectiveness and efficiency is high.

“As I look back over the past couple of years, we’ve made more significant contributions than even I would have anticipated,” Naquin said. “We work, however, at the convergence of the two most dynamic industries: media and information technology. It’s like being in a kayak going downstream at the fork of two rivers; the ride will be challenging, but if you have the skill, it’s also going to be good.”

The Internet, of course, has revolutionized the open source environment. Naquin expects that trend to continue.

“An organization that invests in open source today is akin to an individual who invested in Google in its first year. OSINT has always been an integral component in intelligence, but in five years, I believe the value proposition can only increase. An

organization with an appreciation for OSINT's value and potential will be the most effective in the future.”

If you believe you have the background and skills to work with the Open Source Center, you can [see currently available positions here](#).

#### **Related Stories and Links:**

- [DNI and D/CIA Announce Establishment of the DNI Open Source Center](#)
- [FBIS Against the Axis, 1941-1945](#)
- [Foreign Broadcast Information Service History](#)

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