

Book Review : Open Source Intelligence in a Networked World

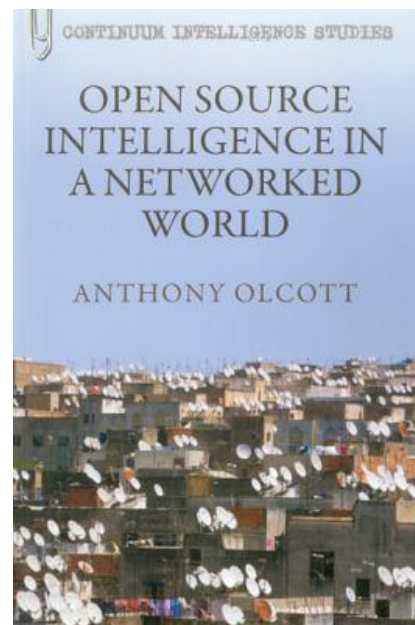
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*The amount of publicly and often freely available information is staggering. Today, the supply of information is greater than any possible demand. As a result, intelligence analysts are drowning in information. The book explains how to navigate this rising flood and make best use of these new, rich sources of information. **Caroline Varin** thinks this is one of the best books written on the subject with beautiful illustrations and references.*

Open Source Intelligence in a Networked World. Anthony Olcott. Continuum. July 2012.

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In *Open Source Intelligence in a Networked World*, author [Anthony Olcott](#) builds the case for open source intelligence gathering, challenging the 'sexy' appeal of covert operations, secret agents, and spies. According to him, between 80 and 90 per cent of intelligence is based on open source material, which has informed and shaped policy making since at least World War II. Furthermore, he estimates that a significant proportion of inferences from open sources are accurate. In this highly readable and referenced text, Olcott addresses fundamental questions of intelligence gathering in a technologically driven world. *Open Source Intelligence in a Networked World* is an excellent book that will be useful and relevant to intelligence analysts, researchers, and students of international relations and media studies.



Olcott begins by highlighting the difficulties of intelligence gathering prior to the advent of the internet. He explains that the intelligence community mainly used open sources issued by the country of origin to collect information on Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and the Soviet Union. Olcott flags the use of propaganda analysis as an important tool for data mining and understanding the capabilities and strategies of the three aforementioned countries. The failure of the intelligence community to predict Pearl Harbor, however, shows the limitations of these methods and the asymmetry of data collection during the war: "the US had little understanding of the enemy capacities and intentions, while the enemy knew a great deal" (p14). Nonetheless, political scientist Alexander George estimates that "80 per cent of the inferences made (...) had been essentially correct" (p17), demonstrating the effectiveness of open source intelligence and analysis even before the age of the internet.

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The technological revolution transformed the ways in which intelligence was gathered and perceived. A wealth of information suddenly became available, creating new problems for intelligence analysts to tackle; according to Olcott, information was 'vulgarised' (p124) in the sense that anyone can claim to be an expert thanks to the internet. The democratisation of information eroded traditional authority hierarchies and created a competitive market in which the 'client' purports to know as much as the analyst. This has challenged the role and purpose of intelligence analysts who have to keep up with the public.

Olcott makes an interesting point when he suggests that the decentralisation of information is actually a return to a natural order: throughout most of history, information has been informal, non-hierarchical and beyond the control of the state. The technological revolution and open access to intelligence has created new opportunities, but also engendered costs: printed information is disappearing, the music and movie industries are threatened by illegal and free downloads, and governments have been weakened by their loss of control over information.

In an age of technological overdose, Olcott also gives important advice to intelligence analysts, which applies both to open source and covert research: he emphasizes the need to ask the right question and the difficulty of sifting through the volume of information available to separate the 'junk' from the salient bits (p. 134). He also highlights the need to analyse the meaning of information, which is the differentiating mark between intelligence gathering and processing. This detail is what sets apart the public from the specialist working in industry, although it also maintains the need for librarians who Olcott argue are still the best people as they are trained to ask the right questions and sift through all the sources of information available.

One interesting and very valid point that Olcott makes is in the critique of the intelligence industry. Olcott shows that hiring practices in the intelligence community tend to favour generalists rather than experts, and people who lack advanced degrees both at the managerial and analyst levels. They are discouraged from engaging with the academic scholarship and often abuse academic relationships, which reduces cooperation and affects the quality of analysis (p. 165).

Olcott pushes the debate on intelligence analysis and distribution even further when he explores the potential use and impact of imagery. Although he acknowledges the value of presenting information visually and the new uses of technology that make this possible, he explains that differences in tradition and interpretation make it difficult to predict the impact an image will have on the receiver (p. 217). This begs the question of how future technology will be able to improve intelligence gathering and distribution through the medium of imagery.

Most people think of 'intelligence' in terms of secrets and covert information gathered through spying and subterfuge. Olcott however shows that "a surprising amount of what passes for 'secret' proves on closer examination to have come from the world of open information". The author argues that the purpose of intelligence is to prevent surprise and reduce the risk of uncertainty in decision-making. Therefore, whether information is secret or openly available may not be the important factor. Rather, it is the purpose for which this information is necessary that must remain secret. This is true whether information is gathered for a private company or for government.

Open Source Intelligence in a Networked World makes a significant contribution to the body of literature on intelligence analysis. It is probably one of the best books written on the subject: beautifully illustrated and referenced, covering several decades of intelligence analysis and extremely well written, it is a pleasure to read which I highly recommend.

Caroline Varin obtained her PhD in International Relations from the London School of Economics and is currently working as an intelligence analyst for sub-Saharan Africa. Her areas of interest include security, terrorism studies, military affairs and intelligence gathering. [Read more reviews by Caroline.](#)