The Relationship Between the Media and Intelligence

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The Relationship Between All Forms of Media and Intelligence Activity

Defining the term 'intelligence' is a rather tricky task. The prevalent definition of intelligence seems to be significantly influenced by popular fiction, therefore in the public imagination intelligence is often thought to be the same thing as espionage and skulduggery (Shulsky, 2002: 1). To many people, there seems to be little difference between intelligence and information, except for the fact that intelligence is secret (Lowenthal, 2006: 1). According to Shulsky, intelligence is 'information relevant to a government's formulation and implementation of policy to further its national security interests and to deal with threats from actual or potential adversaries' (Shulsky, 2002: 1). However, intelligence refers to information that has been collected, processed and narrowed down to be as useful as possible for policy makers. Lowenthal concludes his definition by saying that all intelligence is information but not all information is intelligence (Lowenthal, 2006: 2). This raises the question of what information is worth analysing and processing to make it intelligence, especially with regard to the media and the vast scope of information it provides. According to Omand (2012), 'the "success" of intelligence is not the information or even secrets that it collects, but the value it adds to decision-making' (Omand, 2012: 7). Particularly when it comes to the media and social media, knowing what data is relevant and worth being analysed becomes a vital issue: the problem referred to as wheat versus chaff or noise versus signals (Lowenthal, 2006: 71). In my essay I am going to analyse the relationship between the media – focusing separately on traditional media (i.e. newspapers and television) and social media (i.e. Facebook and Twitter) – and intelligence, as well as the ways in which the media contributes to the effectiveness of intelligence.

The first and the main question to answer is how information can be collected. The most common model explaining intelligence is the intelligence cycle, which mainly consists of collection, processing, analysis and dissemination. There are some debates about this model, for instance, Hulnick (2006) argues that the intelligence cycle

'is not a particularly good model, since the cyclical pattern does not describe what really happens. Policy officials rarely give collection guidance. Collection and analysis, which are supposed to work in tandem, in fact work more properly in parallel. Finally, the idea that decision makers wait for the delivery of intelligence before making policy decisions is equally incorrect' (Hulnick, 2006, quoted in Breakspear, 2012: 3-4).

Collection refers to the gathering of raw data by various means: espionage, using 'open sources' (i.e. the media) and technical means (methods involving some kind of technology) etc. (Shulsky, 2002: 8). However, many definitions of intelligence point out secrecy as a defining feature of it: 'the connection between intelligence and secrecy is central to most of what distinguishes intelligence from other intellectual activities' (Hillebrand, 2012: 691). Therefore according to this definition, the use of information gathered by journalists could not be considered a mean of collecting intelligence information, since it is public – i.e. open-source intelligence. However, this is not always the case, with open-source intelligence being as important as any other type of intelligence. Going back to the roots of intelligence, in the Elizabethan period, when British intelligence was founded, there was no distinction between 'news' and 'secret information' (Goodman, 2009: 118), so should these two categories of information be distinguished now? Open-source intelligence is an integral part of collection and is a crucial source for the analysis. For instance, even during the height of the Cold War, at least 20 per cent of intelligence about the Soviet Union came from open sources (Lowenthal, 2006: 101). However, all-source intelligence (or collection synergy) that is based on as many sources as

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possible compensates for the shortcomings of each of them and combines their strengths (Lowenthal, 2006: 70) seems to be the most effective way of collection.

Journalism, or the media in general has been a part of intelligence related activities for a long time, one of the cases being the BBC's emergence as an intelligence agency during the years of the Second World War. Britain's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) was established to conduct SIGINT (Signals Intelligence) by capturing and decoding encrypted enemy transmissions in 1939 (Calkins, 2011: 1). At the same time, a new unit was created within the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to 'intercept, monitor and report on the open broadcasts of enemy, neutral and Allied radio stations' (Calkins, 2011: 2). This BBC Monitoring Service was meant to listen to, record, transcribe and translate open radio transmissions, in this way producing OSINT i.e. open source intelligence. BBC Overseas Intelligence Department analysed the material and started issuing a Weekly Survey on 'propaganda broadcast by enemy, neutral and allied countries' in 1939 (Calkins, 2011: 2). Also, in the same year BBC began producing Daily Digest, which was mainly edited items broadcasted by foreign radio stations. This information was provided to the Ministry of Economic Warfare, the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Information, MI9, MI5 etc. (Calkins, 2011: 3), thus making BBC not only involved in data collection, but also in its analysis. Therefore the role of BBC was equal to the role and functions of an intelligence agency. British intelligence recognised the fact that the material provided by BBC monitoring was simply unobtainable through any other means (Goodman, 2009: 121). The amount of data being listened to and analysed required a lot of staff and made BBC monitoring a large intelligence body: 1,250,000 words a day being listened to, in thirty different languages, of which 300,000 were translated and transcribed into English every day (Goodman, 2009: 119). Due to technical difficulties some of the transmissions, especially from East Asia, were inaudible. Moving a British team to the United States to get access to the Asian transmissions was considered, but instead it was suggested that the US and the UK should cooperate by sharing Monitoring Reports of different parts of the world (Calkins, 2011: 5). Therefore BBC, which was meant to be a purely journalistic body, not only directly took part in the intelligence cycle but also was a part of transnational cooperation between intelligence agencies. More importantly, BBC's Monitoring Service 'continues to operate in the media-rich environment of the twenty-first century, serving as both a news source and as a supplier of open source intelligence to British government agencies and other subscribers worldwide' (Calkins, 2011: 22).

With the times changing and the world becoming more and more globalized, journalism is becoming slightly outdated since the news gets onto social media platforms, e.g. Facebook and Twitter, much more quickly than onto the news websites. Therefore people more or less voluntarily become a source of intelligence information as journalists instead of being passive witnesses. Omand, Bartlett and Miller argues that SOCMINT – Social Media Intelligence – should be added to the list of all the other intelligence disciplines (Omand, 2012: 1). The list currently includes HUMINT (Human Intelligence), IMINT (Imagery/Photo Intelligence), OSINT (Open Source Intelligence) etc. (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2012). SOCMINT means going even further in the development of the means of data collection and it does undermine the relevance of the OSINT to some extent, since social media is always quicker to react to ongoing or recent events. Also, SOCMINT overlaps with HUMINT: for instance, a huge number of people tried to provide information to the police via social media during the riots in the UK in 2011 (Omand, 2012: 1). The main problem with processing information collection via SOCMINT or HUMINT is that analysts must be unbiased and make objective judgements. McDermott (2011) argues that a more rigorous approach is needed when analysing intelligence information. The most significant outcome of experimental techniques is that 'experiments can benefit intelligence analysis derives from their ability to ascertain causal connections between variables' (McDermott, 2011: 83). For instance, US psychologists believe that Facebook contains valuable indicators of mental health. The social media profiles of some participants in school shootings, such as the suspect in the Ohio School Shooting, TJ Lane, seemed to show some indicative content (Omand, 2012: 3). Therefore trying to find links and patterns might contribute to ensuring public safety and security by foreseeing possible dangers. However, the most important issue in analysing information provided by SOCMINT is that the authorities are not yet able to effectively manage these sources. The reason for this is not only the immense scope of information on the Internet – 250 million photos a day on Facebook, 200 million tweets on Twitter and 4 billion video views per day on Youtube (Omand, 2012: 3) – but also an inability to find the information that matters and distinguish it from the information that is useless to the authorities. Omand's article quotes one intelligence professional: looking for relevant information in the social media is like 'searching the British Library for a page in a book without an index to refer to' (Omand, 2012: 2).

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There are a few key features making SOCMINT successful as well as several significant issues preventing it from being more effective. During the UK's riots, a messaging service established in the West Midlands allowed people to identify pictures of the suspects uploaded to the website, therefore so called 'wisdom of the crowds' was used sensibly. Moreover, as mentioned before, social media allows 'a more rapid identification of emerging events than traditional reporting mechanisms' (Omand, 2012: 6). Also, social media could give some insight into group behaviour by allowing one to follow group-specific conversations and providing awareness of possible protests or demonstrations. However, sometimes it can be a bit pointless. For instance, the recent 'Reading the Riots' collaboration which involved the Guardian, some of the UK's universities, freelance journalists and community researchers gathered 2.6 million tweets about the August 2011 riots (Omand, 2012: 9). Not surprisingly, there were very few examples of Twitter being used to express or encourage criminal activity. Only the tweets that included certain hashtags were scanned and analysed, in this way possibly missing out on some important data. Also, logically thinking, people are aware that they might be monitored and therefore it is very unlikely that there would be tweets that would actually give out information about criminal intentions. It is more likely to happen when it is possible to use invisible and anonymous functions which sometimes lead to 'disinhibited, more intensive, self-disclosing and aggressive uses of language' (Omand, 2012: 12). Finally, the biggest issue in analysing information collected in social media is the lack of context since the search is being done only by using key words. One of the cases is when two people were not allowed to enter the United States after tweeting 'free this week for a quick gossip/prep before I go and destroy America? x' (Omand, 2012: 12); this just proves that there is a long way to go before social media becomes a reliable and manageable source of collecting intelligence information. Therefore the question remains whether all the time and financial resources spent on analysing the data in social media is worth it, and if the outcome of the analysis could possibly contribute to decision-making.

In addition to the media serving as an information collection mechanism as well as being involved in intelligence activities, another important function is that of a 'checking force': there are three main roles of the media relating to this function (Hillebrand, 2012: 693). The first one is bringing important issues up for public debate, for instance, abuse of power and human rights infringements, such as the famous case of Abu Ghraib when American soldiers sexually humiliated and physically abused detainees. Even though it was affirmed that an investigation was taking place before the pictures were made public, serious actions were only taken after the photos became public knowledge (Hillebrand, 2012: 694). Therefore the media served as a trigger for a policy change or at least for some crucial changes in decision making. Another function performed by the media is being a 'substitute watchdog'. When formal institutions refuse or are unable to properly scrutinize an issue, the media serves as a means of making an issue public. For instance, a former National Security Agency employee felt that taxpayers' money was being wasted in a programme called Trailblazer but his concerns were not taken seriously, not until he shared the information with a reporter and the programme has been closed down as a result (Hillebrand, 2012: 698). The final role of the media is serving as a legitimizing institution. In other words, the media helps to build trust in formal intelligence institutions by giving more or less independent oversight of what they are doing, the most significant case probably being the reports on the successful operation that led to killing Osama bin Laden (Hillebrand, 2012: 699). These roles of the media serve the public by making people aware of crucial issues as well as making sure that intelligence agencies are working effectively.

An important point that needs to be taken into account is that the news in the media can be misleading, wrong, and biased, and that journalists (or people, if we are talking about social media) might be exaggerating. One of the cases proving this was when the British Government spent £32 million pounds on a smallpox vaccine, the BBC reported that millions of doses of the smallpox vaccine will be stockpiled by the government in preparation for mass vaccination in case of a bio-terrorist attack, but the Department of Health said that there was no evidence of a specific threat. The Daily Mail exaggerated and made the headline 'New smallpox terror alert' (Omand, 2009: 52). However, according to Omand, 'journalists and spooks have more in common these days than they may like to admit' (Omand, 2009: 37), with both professions seeking to uncover what is hidden. Nevertheless, the main difference between these two fields is that journalists sometimes simply seek getting more attention, whereas the intelligence agencies have to deal with the mess made by the media and explain themselves. The relationship between the intelligence agencies is much more complex than it might seem at the first glance: Hewitt argues that there are adversarial, dependent, manipulative, laudatory and supportive relationships between them, and they are still shifting and overlapping (Hewitt, 2009: 106). For instance, the Defence Advisory Notice Committee was

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established in the United Kingdom with the main goal being to 'provide advice to the media and to officials in the United Kingdom about the publication of national security matters' (Wilkinson, 2009: 133). In other words, it allows the authorities to ask the media not to publish particular information for reasons related to national security. The key issue in the relationship between the media and intelligence agencies is that the duty of the media is to inform public about what is being done by the government, whereas the duty of the government is to conceal certain information to protect the public (Wilkinson, 2009: 134). Campbell (2009) talks about a model on the media-intelligence relationships in Canada but it can easily be adjusted to fit the situation of any other country. He introduces three positions: position X (embedded model) involves journalists working closely with the intelligence services and vice versa; position Z (adversarial model) where a journalist expects distrust and resistance from the intelligence services and therefore seeks to expose them to public scrutiny by any means; finally, position Y (sceptical but balanced) means that a journalist would cover intelligence issues in the same way he covers any other news – objectively. In the same way, a model can be adopted on the intelligence services themselves: position A (open model) where authorities seek to be as open and transparent as possible; position C (closed model) where the relationship with the media is mostly non-cooperative and evasive; finally, position B (cautious) when intelligence services treat the media tactically but only trust the reporters with some news (Campbell, 2009: 170-171).

To sum up, the relationship between the media and intelligence is not only very complex but is also a two-way process. In other words, intelligence needs the media and the media needs intelligence, and it is a mutually beneficial relationship. One way of defining intelligence would be to say that it 'is hard information; that is, information that is hard to get because someone doesn't want you to have it' (Breakspear, 2012: 5). Even though the extent to which the media is involved in intelligence activities might seem threatening to the intelligence agencies, it should not be forgotten that intelligence is about the value it gives to policy and decision-making, rather than focusing on what ways intelligence information is being collected. As mentioned above, the best way to ensure that as much relevant information as possible is collected is only by combining all possible ways of collection. A new definition of intelligence suggested by Alan Breakspear emphasises cooperation:

'Intelligence is a corporate capability to forecast change in time to do something about it. The capability involves foresight and insight, and is intended to identify impending change, which may be positive, representing opportunity, or negative, representing threat' (Breakspear, 2012: 1).

Therefore, the cooperation between the media and intelligence agencies is crucial in order to make intelligence more effective, ensure public and national security, and quickly react to new threats posed.

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