The Case for the Democratization of OSINT and a Collaborative Approach to Detecting and Preventing Humanitarian Crises[1]

by Benjamin Weber

In the most recent issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Amy Zegart pointed out the profound impact that a forward-leaning posture on sharing intelligence by the United States and its allies has had on the war in Ukraine. "By getting the truth out before Russian lies took hold," she contended, "the United States was able to rally allies and quickly coordinate hard-hitting sanctions."[i] She also noted the rapidly growing and evolving role that ordinary civilians are having in formulating our understanding of Russian military and political operations. She welcomed the opportunities, and warned of the dangers, attendant to an intelligence community that is now more open and "democratic" than ever.

Zegart's "profound new reality," in which nongovernmental actors play a significant role as gatherers and interpreters of data regarding what were or would become international crises to produce "open-source intelligence" (OSINT) has in fact been happening for some time. The Harvard Humanitarian Initiative began its work in 2005, and their analyses of commercial satellite imagery provided insights into human rights violations perpetrated in Darfur and elsewhere by the government in Sudan.[ii] Working in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Peter Van der Windt and Macartan Humphreys employed a process they termed "crowdseeding," which engaged local "reporters" to share information on developments in their areas via text message using an agreed vocabulary of terms that could be processed via an aggregating program.[iii]

As has been shown in Ukraine, there is truth to the idea that bringing in as many observers as possible and then pooling the available information freely can be a valuable means of rapidly building a common operational picture. Putting that information directly in the public domain can inform and mobilize the international community for action. This is not a risk-free process: some information may be incomplete, some may be incorrect, some may be misunderstood, and some may be outright disinformation – just like with traditional intelligence collection. But with a little help from professionals, these risks can be managed adequately to allow the clear benefits of a "democratized" OSINT discussion to be realized. Those benefits are even more evident when considering the potential for nongovernmental observers to detect and issue warnings about incipient humanitarian crises or festering inter-communal conflicts that risk ignition into mass atrocity events *before* a crisis occurs.

There is certainly a respectable case for leaving "intelligence analysis" to the "professionals," who are usually serving members of government agencies trained and mentored in their use of intelligence tradecraft. There are also good reasons *not* to do so. First, it is true that government agencies have methods and techniques that can provide good processual grounding, plus vast libraries of prior work offering broader context for their analysts to understand what they have observed in the present moment. However, those unique resources can also be a limitation – real or adopted. Professional government analysts may be wary, or even disdainful, of information or analysis offered by people outside their rarefied realm. They are also often limited in their ability to engage outsiders in an exchange of information, which means that they may not have direct access to people with the most firsthand knowledge of a situation and the most comprehensive understanding of its significance and ramifications. Even if that engagement could occur, those people – NGOs, journalists, academics, and ordinary civilians – might themselves be wary of engaging with a state-led intelligence, military, or security agency, particularly if the exchange is all one-way.[iv]

Second, government analysts work in a system in which their individual reports compete for attention from senior leaders, who themselves are generally too busy with immediate concerns to find time for elective reading and speculative thinking. As one would expect, in such an environment those analytical items focused on existing problems taking precedence. With anticipatory material of the type needed to forestall humanitarian crises and mass atrocities before they explode, unless the

[1] This essay draws substantially on research for my thesis (unpublished), completed in fulfillment of the requirements for my MSSI degree at National Intelligence University. The opinions and characterizations in this piece are mine and do not necessarily represent those of the U.S. government or official TextOre corporate policy. Benjamin Weber, "Detection through Diplomacy in Daylight: New Paradigms for USG-Nongovernmental Collaboration on Anticipatory Intelligence to Prevent Mass Atrocities." (unpublished manuscript, June 2020), Microsoft Word file.

analytical community can get their material to a senior policymaker able to put aside managing the crisis of the day in favor of taking remedial action to prevent or mitigate the possible crisis of tomorrow, it's likely to languish unseen except by other government analysts. Herein lies an additional challenge inherent in the strict division of labor within the larger state apparatus. Analysts do not make (or advocate for) policy, while policymakers do not (or rather, should not) taint the objectivity of the analytical process by injecting a bias towards information that might support their preferred course of action.[v] Recent history shows why this division of labor makes sense, but it also means that the people who are able to sound warnings may not have access to the people able to design responsive courses of action. They also cannot (at least officially) use the channels that civilian activists might employ to spur policymakers to action: elected officials, other civil society organizations, and the media.

By contrast, civil society and academic observers benefit from an unfettered ability to work across national and organization lines, including with local observers who possess vital vernacular language skills and local area and cultural knowledge. To give just one example of the critical nature of such knowledge, there was a vast difference between the content that was carried in Rwanda's French-language media (the language most international observers could follow) and that carried in Kinyarwanda (the local language used by both Hutus and Tutsis), and it was the latter that telegraphed the coming genocide far before the international community at large woke up to the fact that trouble was brewing.[vi] Nongovernmental entities also enjoy unrestricted access to the media, and international public opinion, which means the knowledge they acquire can potentially galvanize a constituency for action faster than analytical products moving through governmental channels.

On the other hand, well-intentioned civilian monitors may lack the training to interpret and ground what they observe into meaningful and, more importantly, actionable analysis. They are also likely more vulnerable to being misled by intentional disinformation spread by hostile actors. On that latter point, Zegart correctly warned of the risk of misinformation, including deep fakes, being injected into the information environment to the detriment of [professional] analysts' ability to sort through the noise and arrive at the truth.

But the other half of "open-source" is "source": unlike material collected by government agencies using their undiscloseable skills and capabilities, the provenance of most open-source material can be shared. This sourcing allows consumers the opportunity to judge the veracity of the data and the quality of the analysis derived from it for themselves. Just as Zegart correctly noted that, "analysis is what turns uncertain findings into insight by synthesizing disparate pieces of information and assessing its context, credibility, and meaning," so too that analysis will be the better for critical examination of the nature and quality of those "disparate pieces of information" by the broadest possible pool of experts able to participate in an open and networked discussion.

Zegart expressed concern about the consequences even when nongovernmental observers might have drawn the correct conclusions. "Accurate open-source discoveries can cause problems, too," she warned. "Findings, for example, might force policymakers into corners by making information public that, if kept secret, could have left room for compromise and graceful exits from crises." This may be true in some circumstances, but the historical record suggests strongly that a great many humanitarian crises might have been averted or mitigated by exactly that level of public exposure, to capture the world's attention and then to force policy makers to respond to the concerns of their constituents. If the alternative to a future Rwanda, Darfur, or Rakhine state crisis is a level of pressure, or even embarrassment, for leaders around the world, that seems a small and transient price to pay for preventing the human and material costs of a humanitarian crisis or mass atrocity. There is great truth to the adage that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure: the costs preventive efforts to head off or mitigate a humanitarian crisis, or of a diplomatic campaign to warn a potential perpetrator against committing a mass atrocity, are vastly less than the costs of dealing with the aftermath of either.

Even with the growth of technology tools, however, finding the key data points is only the beginning of the process. The analysts who take the data further need two additional things that even the most sophisticated algorithms cannot provide. One is a genuine understanding of language, which is more than just a code interpretable by translation programs. Language is culture-laden, language means different things when used by different people in different contexts, and seemingly innocuous phrases can have meanings that even an expert non-linguist would miss, but which a native speaker or

experienced linguist would understand immediately. Having people involved in the process who can interpret those deeper meanings is critical to achieving true understanding of a situation.

The second is a grounding in the international relations disciplines writ large. Yes, there is a context for the simple news-flash spot reports, but those will be competing for the attention of policymakers like all other media. Truly effective information products created in this space will ground the findings in a context and then explain the significance and ramifications of those findings in terms of probable future developments and their impact on the country or region in question and the wider international community. This analysis can inform the creation of a menu of options for what ideally will be timely and effective preventive action.

Recalling the concerns about the quality of product available from nongovernmental entities, this is not an insurmountable challenge. Seminal works by experts like Sherman Kent, Richards Heuer, and Zegart herself are available to the general public, and it is reasonable to expect that nongovernmental actors wanting a seat at the OSINT table would acquaint themselves with established tradecraft. To take this a step further, there is a case to be made for the government itself to inculcate the skills needed to ensure that a democratized OSINT community adheres to certain standards of practice. While serving officers may well be precluded from doing so because of both security considerations and competing demands on their time, retired analysts could be engaged in developing a curriculum – properly vetted to protect truly sensitive methodologies – that could be disseminated to nongovernmental observers. To venture an even more radical conception: just as intelligence professionals are now competing with nongovernmental practitioners, so too are the traditional media competing with independent journalists offering self-edited reporting and commentary through blogs and social media. Shared challenges make for strange bedfellows: a discussion between veteran governmental analysts and veteran journalists about properly sourcing and verifying one's reporting to ensure completeness and accuracy would be a rich one, and might in turn raise the credibility and esteem of both communities in the eyes of the public.

Zegart's concluding recommendation about establishing a truly open open-source intelligence agency is an outstanding one, and one that would go far to ensuring that the blizzard of data now available in the open-source realm can be sorted and processed into something useful. The staff of such an agency may not only be coordinating government OSINT collection and analysis, but also evaluating the quality and utility of open-source intelligence provided by civil society, academic, or private sector intelligence groups. This may mean a more forward-leaning engagement than is the norm for government agencies today. Instead of tapping outside experts for the occasional project or study, the agency could engage in a regular dialogue and exchange with them.

Some parts of the U.S. intelligence community have taken the words of John 8:32[vii] as their mission statement, seeking knowledge and understanding as the antidote to uncertainty and fear. Freedom, however, is most secure when founded on democracy and inclusion, which has historically been at odds with the methodologies of intelligence as a state practice. There will always be a need for the special capabilities of intelligence and security agencies, and sound reasons why some of their activities, practices, and outputs must remain shielded from public view. The reality of a networked world and the knowledge development tools available to it, however, means that such agencies have a shrinking monopoly on many of those capabilities. The new organizations and individuals able to produce information and analysis have no restrictions on their ability to share their output with anyone they please. Rather than treating this as a threat, a better approach will be for government agencies to find constructive ways to join the conversation, making use of its benefits and contributing timely corrections and disputations of erroneous data and misinformation.

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[i] Amy Zegart, "Open Secrets: Ukraine and the Next Intelligence Revolution," *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 102, No.1, January-February 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/open-secrets-ukraine-intelligence-revolution-amy-zegart

[ii] For a discussion of this effort, including the challenges of interpreting images for non-specialists, see Nathaniel A. Raymond, Brittany L. Card, and Isaac L. Baker, "A New Forensics: Developing Standard Remote Sensing Methodologies to Detect and Document Mass Atrocities," (*Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 8, no. 3, 2014): 37 and 45, DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.8.3.4.

[iii] Peter Van der Windt and Macartan Humphreys, "Crowdseeding in Eastern Congo: Using Cell Phones to Collect Conflict Events in Real Time" (*Journal of Conflict Research* 60, no. 4, November 4, 2014): 750, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002714553104.

[iv] UNPROFOR made a point of engaging NGOs and other civilian actors, even including them in their morning briefings, because commanders realized the value of the first-hand information they could provide. Cees Wiebes, Intelligence and the War in Bosnia, 1992-1995, (Studies in Intelligence History, Vol. 1) (London: Lit Verlag, 2003). However, as Ellen Laipson has noted, some NGOs are wary of supporting "wars of choice," and also less interested if the discussion is not a true exchange of information, rather than the NGOs providing a data-dump to government agencies offering nothing in return. Ellen B. Laipson, "Can the USG and NGOs Do More? Information-Sharing in Conflict Zones" Studies in Intelligence 49, no. 4, (2005), https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol49no4/USG_NGOs_5.htm

[v] For a thoughtful discussion of the value -- and limits -- to this approach, see Bowman H. Miller, "Intelligence and Policy: The Case for Thin Walls as Seen by a Veteran of INR," Studies in Intelligence 62, no. 2 (June 2018): 4, https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol-62-no-2/pdfs/miller-inr-intel-policy.pdf. Miller contends that, "Analysis is not and cannot be captive of, beholden to,
or tainted by policy. However, it must still be acquainted with policy aims, instruments, and actions to be relevant to an informed decision making process."

[vi] That said, the knowledge was available, and the other primary challenge may have been generating interest in making preventive efforts. See B.W. Ndiaye (Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions), *Report by Mr. B.W. Ndiaye, Special Rapporteur, on his Mission to Rwanda from 8 to 17 April 1993*, E/CN.4/1994/7/Add.1. (New York: UN Commission on Human Rights, August 11, 1993), 17. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/226256?ln=en.

[vii] "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32, King James Version, https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/John-8-32/