Social Media and U.S. Intelligence Agencies: Just Trending or a Real Tool to Engage and Educate?

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Abstract

Social media use has become ubiquitous not just among individuals, groups, and businesses, but also government institutions. In turn, the adoption of services like Facebook and Twitter in the public sector has increasingly become the focus of academic study. U.S. intelligence agencies, however, have been excluded from examination. The potential benefits—engagement, education, and transparency, among others—are significant, and studying how U.S. intelligence uses social media will help us realize those benefits. In the arcane, complex and potentially intrusive world of intelligence, new opportunities to bolster public knowledge and accountability must be utilized. Today, understanding government requires studying e-government, and in intelligence, social media likely represents the most direction connection between citizens and the public agencies that serve them. To take a first step, this study maps how U.S. intelligence agencies are using Facebook and Twitter, examines other social media practices, and presents findings from correspondence with four intelligence and security journalists.

Introduction

The Obama Administration's Open Government Initiative has compelled U.S. federal agencies to increase efforts at government openness, information sharing with the public, accountability and engagement.[1] For many federal entities, this has included the establishment of a social media presence—a combined 3,000 Facebook pages[2] and 1,000 Twitter accounts,[3] making them the most commonly used services in the federal government. Least common are Flickr and the use of blogs.[4]

The prevalent use of social media by government is not just true at the federal level. Even at the local level, governments in the United States are using social media in huge numbers. Norris and Reddick found ninety-four percent of local governments have created social media accounts.[5] The potential benefits of this still young phenomenon are many, though skeptics and limits abound to be sure. A number of early findings suggest that practice may not quite be living up to potential.

U.S. intelligence agencies have also become a part of this phenomenon, with many of the major national intelligence agencies creating Facebook and Twitter accounts. The limitations of what intelligence agencies can do and share on social media are somewhat obvious. Nonetheless, the establishment of social media pages is indicative of new opportunities for interface between the Intelligence Community (IC) and the public, perhaps with a role to play for the news media. And while scholars have begun to look at social media as a tool for intelligence collection and analysis (social media intelligence, or SOCMINT),[6] studies on the use of social media by intelligence agencies to inform, engage, education and interact have yet to materialize. Any gain in the public's knowledge on intelligence issues and operations—outside of the rightly classified context—should be viewed as a tremendous societal benefit. Understanding broader issues and practices is wholly doable, if perhaps a lofty goal, and can better equip the public with a base from which they can induce legislative and political actions consistent with and constrained by public preferences. Thus, social media, if used

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[1] John T. Snead, "Social Media Use in the U.S. Executive Branch," *Government Information Quarterly* 30 (2013): 56-63.

[2] Ines Mergel, "Social Media Adoption and Resulting Tactics in the U.S. Federal Government," *Government Information Quarterly* 30 (2013): 123-130.

[3] Staci M. Zavattaro and Arthur J. Sementelli, "A Critical Examination of Social Media Adoption in Government: Introducing Omnipresence," *Government Information Quarterly* 31 (2014): 257-264.

[4] Snead, "Social Media Use in the U.S. Executive Branch."

[5] Donald F. Norris and Christopher G. Reddick, "Local E-Government in the United States: Transformation or Incremental Change," *Public Administration Review* 73 (2013): 165-175.

[6] David Omand, Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, "Introducing Social Media Intelligence (SOCMINT)," *Intelligence and National Security* 6:27 (December, 2012): 801-823; Joshua Rovner, "Intelligence in the Twitter Age," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 2:26 (Summer, 2013): 260-271.

and received well, can strengthen the accountability chain between the public, political principals, and intelligence "agents."

This study is a first step to fill that gap, and has three core objectives: to understand the ways in which intelligence agencies are using social media to present themselves to the world; to get an early look at how fully and dynamically these organizations are utilizing social media; and to contribute to the full utilization of these tools—even in agencies that operate on the basis of secrecy and security. Only by studying and understanding how these tools are being used can their benefits be entirely realized. This study will help shed light on whether or not intelligence agencies are taking social media seriously, or if they are simply going along with the trend because "everyone is doing it."

Through this research, we can begin to develop insight into the veracity of the various social media platforms. "Mapping" the content being posted by intelligence agencies is thus a necessary first step. If the content of social media is not substantive and interesting, it is likely that the public will lose interest and disengage.[7] This study will also create the knowledge sets to then begin investigating the processes and people "behind the scenes" in the social media staffs producing and posting content. And with a picture of how these services are being used, studying this phenomenon from the citizen perspective becomes more practical (including things like sentiment analysis, which is enabled by social media analytic tools).

To execute this study, ninety consecutive days of Facebook posts by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA), the National Security Agency (NSA), the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) were manually coded to form a grounded map of social media activity. The same was done for sixty consecutive days of Twitter tweets for the ODNI and NSA. This map will in turn inform the study's core research questions, many of which are essentially borrowed from the extant literature on social media in government. Other factors and metrics used to study social media will also be examined. Journalists who specialize in security and intelligence matters were surveyed to understand if and how they use social media as part of their job, as well as how they view the content made available on the social media sites of intelligence agencies. There are potential "multiplier effects" of journalist use of these resources, if journalists rely on them and find them to be valuable.

The next section will introduce the concept of social media in government, track contemporary developments, discuss promise and limits, and provide an overview of what we have learned to date about the practice of social media in government. That is followed by a more extended discussion of social media in

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[7] Sara Hofmann, Daniel Beverungen, Michael Rackers and Jorg Becker, "What Makes Local Governments' Online Communities Successful? Insights from a Multi-Method Analysis of Facebook," *Government Information Quarterly*, 30 (2013): 387-396.

intelligence, leading into the study's sampling rationale, specific research questions, methods and findings. A summary discussion and conclusion round out the paper, outlining key observations and needed future research directions.

Social Media in Government Organizations

Social media includes a number of services and platforms that we have all become very familiar with: social networking (Facebook), micro-blogging, wikis, and media sharing (YouTube). Social media services are usually maintained as third-party platforms, and allow users to create profiles and content, share their own and other content, and connect and dialogue with others, among other things. Individuals as well as organizations can become part of these online communities and forums. The use of social media is considered the fifth wave of government information and communication technology, preceded by mainframes, central timeshare systems, personal computers and online services.[8] It is a core facet of Web 2.0, which is characterized by user-generated content and online identities and communities. More simple forms of social media were certainly used by people and government prior to the Web 2.0 era, including things like bulletin boards.[9]

As noted above, the administration of Barack Obama issued its Open Government Initiative and Directive and the Web 2.0 phenomenon has been firmly established in federal government agencies. There is certainly a norm and expectation that organizations use social media to extend their presence and provide easier access to government information. After all, social media allows government to meet people "where they are," with the frequently posited benefits of public education, engagement and participation, service provision, collaborative efforts and co-production, openness, transparency and accountability, trust building, and communication efficiency.

There are an equal number of potential concerns regarding the real efficacy of government use of social media. Still in the early going, the benefits of social media in government remain an open question for a variety of reasons. First, political risks accompany the use of social media. Mistakes and missteps can result in backfires and unintended consequences, possibly upsetting constituents and dampening agency use. Thus, the vetting of information and interaction on social media can hinder the twenty-four-hour, real-time nature of social media interaction. There is also the possibility that agencies use social media in a protective fashion in order to maintain or serve their own reputations.

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[8] Stuart I. Bretschneider and Ines Mergel, "Technology and Public Management Information Systems: Where We Have Been and Where Are We Going," in Donald C. Menzel and Harvey L. White (eds.), *The State of Public Administration: Issues, Problems and Challenges* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2011), 187-203.

[9] John Carlo Bertot, Paul T. Jaeger, and Derek Hansen, "The Impact of Policies on Government Social Media Usage: Issues, Challenges, and Recommendations," *Government Information Quarterly* 29 (2012): 30-40.

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When using sites like Facebook and Twitter, governments cede control to the third-party vendors who maintain social media sites, making it more difficult to ensure that content is properly maintained and protected. Another issue is the "digital divide," the problem that certain demographics and individuals may not have equal access to online forums. Another critique or concern is that national security organizations cannot make use of social media given the nature of their work. However, such organizations are in fact using social media, and it remains an empirical question as to what can and is being accomplished.

Experimentation and "constructive chaos" have described much of the unfolding use of social media by the U.S. federal government.[10] Federal agencies have tested and tinkered with various tools and approaches (ironically settling on the more basic uses), relying on observation of citizen use and preferences, the practices of other agencies, peer interaction, and formal guidelines.[11] The result is the use of social media as a "pure broadcasting mechanism,"[12] simply "pushing" existing information through new channels. These dynamics have also been observed abroad and down to the local level,[13] with trial and error approaches resulting in pre-Web 2.0 tactics.[14]

To be sure, there have been positive and effective uses of social media, including in the realm of security and foreign policy. Social media has proven effective in emergency management and security threat scenarios, in some cases with the crucial aid of respected journalists.[15] The U.S. Department of State has adopted the practice of receiving and responding to citizen and journalist questions on matters of foreign policy and diplomacy[16]. Conversely, the Transportation Security Administration has edited the public comments posted on their social media sites,[17] a practice that has been exhibited elsewhere as well and can serve to dampen user interest.[18]

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[10] Ines Mergel, "Social Media Adoption: Toward a Representative, Responsive or Interactive Government?" *Proceedings of the 13th Annual Conference on Digital Government Research* (2014).

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Norris and Reddick, "Local E-Government in the United States"; Sergio Picazo-Vela, Isis Gutierrez-Martinez and Luis Felipe Luna-Reyes, "Understanding Risks, Benefits, and Strategic Alternatives of Social Media Applications in the Public Sector," *Government Information Quarterly* 29 (2012): 504-511.

[14] Hofmann et al., "What Makes Local Governments' Online Communication Successful?"

[15] Michael J. Magro, "A Review of Social Media Use in E-Government," *Administrative Sciences*, 2 (2012): 148-161; Deanne Bird, Megan Ling and Katharine Haynes, "Flooding Facebook: The Use of Social Media During the Queensland and Victorian Floods," *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* 27 (2012): 27-33; Kyujin Jung and Han Woo Park, "Citizens' Social Media Use and Homeland Security Information Policy: Some Evidence from Twitter users during the 2013 North Korea Nuclear Test," *Government Information Quarterly* 31 (2014): 563-572.

[16] Ines Mergel, "The Social Media Innovation Challenge in the Public Sector," *Information Polity* 17 (2012): 281-292.

[17] John Carlo Bertot, Paul T. Jaeger and Justin M. Grimes, "Promoting Transparency and Accountability through ICTs, Social Media, and Collaborative E-Government," *Transforming Government: People, Process and Policy* 1:6 (2012): 78-91.

[18] Zavattaro and Sementelli, "A Critical Examination of Social Media Adoption in Government."

Social Media in U.S. Intelligence Organizations

Prior to the internet explosion of the 1990s, and the subsequent onset of Web 2.0, some U.S. intelligence agencies were not yet publicly recognizing their own existence. The National Security Agency was given the somewhat joking moniker "No Such Agency." Today, these same agencies are known by millions, "liked" by at least thousands, and voluntarily posting to keep the public, media, and others apprised of, well, something about them. This public relations adjustment is quite a shift, and arguably provides the most robust and direct interface between U.S. intelligence organizations and the publics they work for. These considerations alone demonstrate the importance of understanding this phenomenon.

This new dynamic between intelligence agencies and the public creates new opportunities for openness and accountability in a policy realm that is arcane, critical to public security and liberty, and exhibits increasingly powerful capabilities. While much of what is done by intelligence agencies must remain classified, not everything is secret, and issues and functions can be addressed at a responsible level of detail. This can include creative and innovative new practices, such as crowdsourcing and Town Hall-style meetings. There are likely other potential inventive and engaging uses that have not yet been identified, and some encouraging uses were found in this study.

Research Objectives and Questions

This paper seeks to understand the ways in which U.S. intelligence agencies are using social media not as a tool to collect or analyze intelligence, but as a tool to present themselves outwardly and engage with the public in various ways. Thus, the coding scheme developed captures the various uses of social media by the five selected organizations. A leading question is whether or not the agencies are posting content and features that exhibit the best uses of social media (substantive information, interactional facets). Conversely, are they distributing more peripheral information and in a one-directional (or "push-based") fashion. Said differently, does use of Facebook and Twitter seem to be serving meaningful educational ends? Are the new opportunities social media platforms provide being robustly utilized, or are the agencies simply using these services to push information that is already in circulation? To investigate these questions, the paper will look most closely at:

- Facebook and Twitter activity within the individual agencies (quantitatively and qualitatively)
- The aggregation of those findings across the five agencies
- Counts of the number of replicated and shared posts
- Conversely, counts of original posts
- The content found in the category "agency functions"

Additional considerations include the number of followers each agency has (a relatively crude participation metric), a review of the other social media being used by the selected agencies, and the accessibility of social media links on the home pages of the CIA, DIA, NSA, ODNI and NGA. The findings will be presented separately for Facebook and Twitter so that a unique picture of each can be painted.

Journalists have proven instrumental in supporting security agencies use of social media, and social media also provides journalists with another source of information and potential stories.[19] Given their placement, if journalists are finding the social media sites of intelligence agencies to be informative and helpful, there can be significant multiplier effects.

Sampling and Methods

The agencies selected for this study—the DIA, CIA, NGA, NSA and ODNI—each have national intelligence functions and together represent a significant portion of the IC. They also offer a diverse set of responsibilities: all-source analysis, IC-wide management, warfighter support, and signals intelligence. Data were taken from the Facebook sites of these agencies from September 15, 2014 to December 15, 2015 and the Twitter feeds of the ODNI and NSA from October 15, 2014 to December 15, 2015. One caveat is that the data were saved in chunks, meaning that if agencies posted content and then removed it, it will not be captured in this study. In a sense, this actually reflects a potentially important dynamic and limit of social media.

A review and content analysis of the data resulted in a coding scheme of eleven categories (plus a miscellaneous category), and in turn a grounded map of social media activity. The categories arrived at are as follows:

- Agency functions
- History
- Recruitment
- Honors and commemoration
- News articles
- Holiday wishes
- Events
- Interactive features
- Public statements (written and in-person)
- Site maintenance
- Technical assistance (only found in Twitter data)
- Miscellaneous

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[19] Jung and Park, "Citizens' Social Media Use and Homeland Security Information Policy."

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A greater focus was placed on Facebook as it has thus far proven to be more commonly used by federal agencies. Thus, the findings on Twitter should be viewed with slightly higher skepticism, as it includes less agencies and less time. Another limit is that tweets can "stack up" around single events or issues on a given day, warping or biasing somewhat the study results. These cases will be noted for readers.

The study also sought a convenience sample of security and intelligence journalists at major news outlets. Journalists were asked about how often they access the social media sites of intelligence agencies, which social sites they tended to use, for what purposes they check and utilize these sites, and their views on the nature and quality of social media content. The five questions asked are provided in their entirety below. Journalists agreed to participate on the basis of anonymity, and thus their names and organizational affiliations will not be included in this paper.

Study Findings

Facebook and U.S. Intelligence Organizations

The five intelligence organizations selected for this study posted a combined 186 times to their Facebook pages between September 15, 2014 and December 15, 2014. The CIA was most active (fifty-five posts), followed by the NSA (forty-four), NGA (thirty-eight), DIA (thirty-five) and ODNI (fourteen). Of these 186 total posts, 104 were shares of existing content. Most of these shared posts were from other sites and organizations (fifty-seven of ninety-six), and the remainder (forty-seven of ninety-six) were agencies replicating their own information that had originated elsewhere, typically their own websites. Thus, more than half (fifty-six percent) of all the posted content was replication of existing information, and the remainder were unique posts intended for the Facebook platform. In some cases, reposted content came with additional content, usually in the form of narrative, and those cases were coded as unique posts, not shared ones. In these cases, the shared portion was generally provided in the event that the user wanted to "read more." Thus, the calculations presented here are conservative in nature. And, of course, sharing does mean that information is being distributed more broadly, making it more likely people will access information.
Overall, the most common type of post was connected to history and past events (twenty-two percent)—driven largely by the CIA. Commemorations and honors (most typically of those who served in military or intelligence) were close behind at sixteen percent. Agency functions, a category to be returned to in more depth below, constituted twelve percent of all posts. The reposting of news stories totaled eleven percent of all activity, and recruitment outreach ten percent. The remaining categories were all less than ten percent (holiday wishes, agency events, public statements, and interactive features).

The CIA, the most active "poster" on Facebook, tended to provide information on history and past events (often interesting gadgetry or operations) and honored

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fallen military and intelligence personnel. The NSA most typically posted for purposes of recruitment and outreach, followed by interactive features (the weekly Cryptologic Challenge). The NGA posted most about their own functions, followed by the replication of news stories. The DIA tended to post content related to honors and agency special events. Lastly, the ODNI, which only posted fourteen times in the ninety-day period under examination, provided mostly information on agency functions and honors and commemorations. The ODNI posts were almost exclusively shares of content found on other websites or social media pages.

Even within the more substantive category of 'agency functions,' which is broadly construed to include the actual work and operations of the selected intelligence agencies, the information provided still tended to be peripheral or secondary. This is not to say substantive information was absent altogether. For example, following the Senate's report on CIA practices in the War on Terror, the CIA responded by repeatedly posting statements relating to the charges. Those who follow the CIA, or check in on the CIA's Facebook page, would have found a rather detailed, if not defensive, retort explaining the agency's position and practice. The agency stated that it had not actively worked to deceive executive and legislative branch officials, as the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence had charged, and that its advanced interrogation techniques had been ended. While these responses may not be surprising, and certainly do not lead to the end of the story for an interested "follower," they certainly engage a very important contemporary issue in intelligence policy and provide a relatively in-depth discussion of the agency's operations and perspectives.

Also in the category of agency functions, the NGA posted a report on its "analytic environment" in the year 2020, and also provided information on their operations in support of agencies like the US Geological Survey and Library of Congress. Other posts in this category included campus visits by key legislators and reports that new high-level officials had come to an agency. Posts that were included in other categories—news stories, public statements—while not terribly frequent, can also include more substantive content on agency operations. Such posts included profiles of and interviews with high-level officials. Included in this category are agency news magazines, such as NGA's Pathfinder, which for example included a story on the use of gamification (providing badges for professional accomplishments—perhaps slightly infantilizing). The only agency to offer no posts related to agency functions was the National Security Agency, still perhaps hewing to the "No Such Agency" reputation of before, but in a new era of government expectations and practice.

Near the end of July 2015, the DIA had approximately 314,000 followers, the CIA 454,000, the NSA 224,000, the ODNI 120,000, and the NGA 62,000. Given that Facebook is closing in on nearly 1 billion followers,[20] these numbers do not paint a picture of wide public engagement with the social media sites of intelligence

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[20] Snead, "Social Media Use in the U.S. Executive Branch."

agencies. Additionally, there is certainly an issue of selection bias here, with those already interested in intelligence likely to "like" and follow. This is an underlying weakness of social media, and it certainly seems the average person is not following intelligence agencies using social media. So, questions remain on the audience being reached, the way that audience is being engaged, and the multiplier effects of that audience's use of social media.

Twitter and U.S. Intelligence Organizations (ODNI, NSA)

In July 2015 the ODNI was up to 34,000 followers on Twitter, and like on Facebook, the ODNI almost exclusively shared preexisting information from other sources and intelligence agencies (for a total of 82 tweets). Approximately a quarter of this content was coded as agency functions, giving the ODNI's Twitter feed a somewhat substantive bent. Examples of these tweets include budget figures, IARPA projects, document releases, and the establishment of new offices. The ODNI also frequently tweeted in reference to IC on the Record (which it operates on Tumblr), though these tweets could come in clumps. For example, the ODNI tweeted almost twenty times in a single day regarding an IC on the Record Q and A session (the NSA did the same, though not with quite as many tweets). This frequent, bordering on frenetic, tweeting is to be expected in the dense, in-the-moment realm of Twitter. A single tweet is likely to simply get lost in the barrage of other information users and followers receive on a daily basis.

The NSA was comparatively more active on Twitter than the ODNI, offering 131 tweets in the two-month period examined. A majority of these tweets consisted of sharing and retweeting information and posts from other sources and sites. Seventy-six of these tweets were shares or retweets of other sources, while twenty-two were replications of NSA information. The NSA most frequently posted on events, often as they were happening, involving the agency or agency officials. In fact, half of all NSA tweets were connected to events. Such events included the NSA Director attending RAND and Stanford events and kids being invited to the White House for a coding activity. Many of these tweets were connected to a small number of events (essentially, repeat tweets).

The NSA did frequently share information and documents intended to help the public and organizations secure their computers and networks from viruses and hackers. This was done sixteen times in two months. As of late July, 2015 NSA's Twitter account was being followed by nearly 65,000 people, compared to 224,000 on Facebook.

Other Social Media Uses and Practices

Of the agencies selected for this study, the CIA demonstrated the broadest use of social media platforms. As of early spring in 2015, the CIA website offered links to its Flickr, Google+, YouTube and Pinterest pages (as well as Facebook and Twitter). The links are not all located in the same place however, and are not on the top of the homepage, a practice recommended in the literature to improve

visibility and increase use.[21] Flickr and YouTube are available on the homepage (multiple times actually), but the other links are found on the news and information page. Additionally, the CIA maintains a blog on its website.

Table 1: Other Social Media Use (Linked through home websites)*

	Flickr	Google +	YouTube	LinkedIn	Tumblr	Pinterest	Instagram
CIA	X	X	X			X	
NSA					X		
DIA			X	X			X
ODNI	X		X		X		
NGA				X			

  *As of March 2015

The ODNI also maintains Flickr, YouTube, Scribd and Tumblr accounts, with all links available on the top section of the homepage. The DIA provides links to YouTube, Instagram and LinkedIn on its homepage, though at the bottom of the screen. The NGA and NSA each provide only one additional link (beyond Facebook and Twitter) on their homepages. The NGA has a link to LinkedIn near the top of its homepage, and the NSA to IC on the Record, which is hosted on Tumblr.

Journalists, Social Media and U.S. Intelligence Organizations

Another potential value-adding implication of intelligence agency use of social media is how journalists at major media outlets utilize this new information source. The news media can serve a "multiplier effect," a magnifying interface between intelligence agencies and the public. Reporters can also use the content provided on these sites to grow their own knowledge, raise new questions or develop new stories. Jung and Park have shown that reporters can serve as needed intermediaries between security and intelligence agencies and the general public.[22]

To investigate these dynamics, the author corresponded with four reporters from a variety of major outlets, including big city newspapers, online-only outlets, and multinational news organizations. While this is certainly not a large or scientific participant base, each of the reporters works for a major outlet and is thus in a uniquely critical position. Study participants answered the following five questions:

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Jung and Park, "Citizens' Social Media Use and Homeland Security Information Policy."

1. How often do you look at the social media pages of intelligence agencies? What social media sites are you more likely to use to find information?

2. Do you use the social media pages of intelligence agencies to learn about intelligence issues and programs?

3. Have you used the social media pages of U.S. intelligence agencies to identify or develop news stories that you've researched or written? If so, could you please explain?

4. Do you think the content posted on these social media pages is of informational and educational value to the general public?

5. How often do you "re-post" or "re-tweet" content you find on the social media sites of intelligence agencies?

While study participants often described the content provided on the social media pages as thin and not particularly helpful (for them, or the general public), some passively "follow" U.S. intelligence agencies on Twitter. While three of four participants stated they follow the Twitter accounts of intelligence agencies, only one mentioned Facebook, and the use noted was reactive, that is, for a specific issue or story. Three out of the four participants also cited the ODNI's IC on the Record Tumblr account as an important resource. Regarding IC on the Record, participants said the following:

"IC on the Record…that's actually a fairly decent source for the official line on…programs."

"One exception I think is ODNI'S 'ICONTHERECORD' Tumblr. It has been genuinely useful to have a central repository of declassified documents from the government that is far more use-friendly than the FOIA reading rooms or other cluttered ways in which other agencies have tended to make declassified documents available."

In addition to information on declassified documents and information, IC on the Record serves a number of other functions. The Tumblr page also offers followers Q and A sessions with IC officials (which many tweets brought attention to), budget information, access to speeches and interviews, and other key public intelligence and national security reports. Further study with a singular focus on IC on the Record is probably a good idea.

What will be noticed in the first quote above is that social media is a good source for "the official line," an observation that was echoed by others, with one reporter stating that the information and commentary found on the social media sites of intelligence agencies can border on propaganda. But, it seems that one of the most common and helpful uses of social media is to access official statements and

documents issued by intelligence agencies. Thus, rather than learning about new programs, issues or stories, reporters use social media to gather official statements on matters already identified. One participant noted his interest in tracking what intelligence (and military) agencies "don't post."

However, the information on Twitter pages was described as not very substantive. One participant said "tweets don't often contain much useful information." This participant added that following intelligence agencies' social media will not give individuals (the public) much knowledge on operations and priorities. Another felt that social media content would only be informative to those who already have "deep interests in the subject at hand." Reposting of social media content by reporters was not common, though it was done by a number of participants in certain circumstances. Thus, the direct value to the public of the social media pages of U.S. intelligence agencies, at least to date, is limited in the eyes of leading intelligence reporters.

Discussion

While there was divergence in use among the various intelligence agencies included in this study, the above analysis does not necessarily paint a picture of social media as a robust tool of public transparency, engagement and education. To begin, a relatively small number of people follow intelligence agencies on Facebook and Twitter. Those who do are likely more favorably disposed to intelligence agencies, and are probably already quite knowledgeable. And given the sheer volume of traffic that comes across individuals' Facebook and Twitter feeds, as well as the limits placed on what comes across feeds, even these individuals are likely to miss lots of what is posted. Of course, followers (and non-followers) can repost Facebook and Twitter content, and non-followers can visit the social media pages of intelligence agencies.

Much of what is found on the Facebook and Twitter pages of US intelligence agencies is replicated from other sources, rather than original content. This is, of course, not necessarily a bad thing. Social media affords direct and efficient channels to distribute information to the public, allowing for greater reach, even if that reach is used to simply "push" out content that is already available.

It is, of course, perhaps naïve to expect to be educated about intelligence agencies by the agencies themselves. But, as some of the reporters commented, getting quick access to the "official line" and other declassified information represents a gain—even if in some cases those benefits come from being observant about what intelligence agencies do not comment on. But, being sensitive to what is not there is probably something limited to experts, such as intelligence journalists.

Given the relative lack of emphasis placed on more substantive information, the "pushing" of existing content, and the minimal amount of interactive use of social media, it might be safe to conclude that intelligence agencies are exercising due diligence more than anything else. To not be a part of this trend would defy

federal directives and also give the appearance of being out of touch or even evasive.

Conclusion

This is the first foray into the study of how U.S. intelligence organizations are using social media as a tool for education, engagement, and transparency. Much more remains to be done, including examination of the other social media sites used by intelligence agencies. Future studies can also expand the number of intelligence agencies being examined and the time frame examined. It is important to learn which platforms work best for which agencies and which purposes, a question that will partly be explored through studying how people perceive and use the various social media services. Sentiment and network analysis of social media followers can add yet another dimension to our understanding of the phenomenon, as can more robust evaluations of participation, beyond "likes," "followers," and "re-tweets." Social media analytics offer a range of capacities that will add greatly to the grounded, contextual approach taken in this paper.

Gaining access to the stories and processes behind the content is also an important research objective for this agenda. Surveying and interviewing social media directors and managers will provide that key additional dimension. While this study sought to explain "what" comes out of the process, it's also important to understand the "how" of the process, and ultimately "who" is engaging with the social media of U.S. intelligence organizations.

To better understand twenty-first century governance, the information age and living in an e-society, we must closely track these new developments and contribute to the furthering of their prospects and possibilities. Social media may not produce all of the many benefits ascribed to it, though with proper attention and guidance, it certainly can do more than what critics suggest. Social media is a growing and changing phenomenon, not a fixed one. The best uses and innovations in social media, including in the context of intelligence organizations, are hopefully yet to come. Simply said, what happens with social media is largely a function of what society, people, practitioners and scholars want out of it. From the starting point that intelligence accountability and public education are increasingly important, and that social media affords an opportunity to strengthen both, the study of how intelligence agencies use social media must join the different intelligence studies literatures.

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