

Dial “M” for Media

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a good journalist can
tell us as much about a
situation as the spies can.

So why not scrap the spies
and subsidise the newspapers?
— George Smiley

By Michel Bajuk

Sources of information which can be obtained legally, ethically and at low cost – that’s the mindblowing theme when European spies, police and other intelligence professionals gather for a conference.

The language-gifted charlatans, frosty robots and smooth diplomats are all here to discuss matters they can’t actually discuss. They are well-dressed, articulate and politically correct. They speak discreetly and thoughtfully. The European championships in verbal judo is being fought between spies, police chiefs, mafia hunters and former members of several governments. I see Fleming’s 007, I hear Guillou’s Hamilton and I sense Le Carré’s Smiley. The jargon, characters and the atmosphere – everything is familiar.

The main question of the conference is: “How can we make better use of open sources of information?” It is an important question, however odd that may be.

“Nine times out of 10 a good journalist can tell us quite as much about a situation as the spies can. Very often they’re sharing the same sources anyway,” the spy legend Smiley declares in *Secret Pilgrim*.

The assertion may be true. A good 90% of all existing information is estimated to be available through open sources. So, that is where the intelligence agencies acquire most of their rough material?

No. Some. Fact is, a lot of rivers are crossed to requisition water. It just so happens that spies traditionally have a certain reluctance to use open sources.

There is a “bias among some in the intelligence and policy communities against open sources, stemming from the erroneous belief that no information that is valuable is likely to be easily accessible or unclassified”, a US Congressional study concludes. The presidential Brown Commission Report finds that “the information obtained from open sources was substantial and on some points more detailed than that provided by the intelligence community”.

“Can it really be this bad?” I ask an influential manager working for a big secret service. My name badge is carefully inspected. I’m a cat among the foxes.

“I can’t remember one single occasion when we thoroughly examined the most easily accessible sources before we started an operation – and I have worked quite a while for the service. It’s all about prestige. Our management is rather... hmmm... conservative.

“We have an excellent organisation, but in the field of information technology our staff is, uhummm... eight years behind. I would guess.”

“You know, as soon as cops get a desk they sit on their butts. There kind of isn’t much information being gathered,” an executive police officer says. I’m stunned.

“The Internet is covered by one person in our organisation,” says a representative of an important international police force. They should be glad to have anyone at all,” I hear a couple of other participants comment.

Isn’t there anybody who is smart enough to use the cheapest and most accessible resources first? Yes, luckily enough. Swedish military intelligence, Italian mafia hunters and the London Metropolitan Police are considered to be role models of European intelligence.

I greet a delegation from one of our new democracies. No titles, no employers – their name badges aren’t particularly informative. I learn that they “recognise” my name. So I ask what “bureau” they work for.

“No name” is the brief answer. After several failures to start a conversation I politely ask if they intend to continue the night out on the town.

Their eyes glow and gaze intensely at me in the following silence. There is a twitch in the corner of the mouth of a well-trained young man in the background. I forget to breathe. “Yes...we have zome... bizniz to take care of.”

I shiver and seek shelter in a group of ex-spies. It occurs to me that one of the charming and distinguished gentlemen is the former head of a big counter-intelligence agency. I count the years back to a rather disturbing “incident” and wash down my memories with a Scotch. It has a peculiar scent of vodka/martini.

The Cold War is over. For most of us, anyway. The world is opening up. The information revolution is celebrating an increasing number of victories without bloodshed.

Obviously it’s not easy to be a spy today.

“The Chinese panda is too cute and cuddly to supplant the Russian bear, besides he has nearly a quarter of the world’s population and can produce gobs of cheap consumer goods at unbelievable prices,” an official snaps ironically.

Someone hints about coming reductions. A former CIA-agent, now “security consultant”, emboldens the audience:

“Don’t worry about the retirement plans. Your services and knowledge are desired in the private sector.”

Oh no, they need not worry. Terrorists, drug cartels and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction have successfully been used to sustain intelligence fund-

ing levels so that sound sleeping can be guaranteed. In this “new, more dangerous world” the CIA is the unquestioned world champion in counter-intelligence with an annual budget of \$26.6 billion – 10% of the US defence budget, considerably more than most countries spend

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on their entire defence. A reduction of the US, and any other nation’s, secret intelligence budget is not likely.

So, how much of the budget is used for open source activities? “Less than two percent.” That’s a qualified guess from a, uhum, not open source.

The bias in the spread of resources is not only a US problem. Some of the participants seem to be rather frustrated. They talk about competition from mass media and information providers in areas where classic clandestine operations are ungraceful, ineffective and extremely expensive. “Governments trust what they pay for,” the legend Smiley tells his young spy recruits in Le Carré’s new novel. So true.

The conference proceeds. There are speeches about military networks, economic counter spying and electronic security. Intelligence strategies, surveillance tactics and secret agents are discussed. I miss “Q”.

Finally it’s time for the highlight of the conference: a rare open source expert. In his nameless bureau 10 or so specialists work specifically with open sources: statistical databases, information services and public archives. Using computer assisted analysing tools they serve the rest of the bureau’s 200 agents with raw facts. These are then refined with the help of informers, human sources and leaks from all levels of society. The bureau is represented globally with contracted field operators.



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Continued on page 53

Dial "M" for Media

Continued from page 47

The service has millions of clients demanding correct, cutting-edge, and far-reaching intelligence about the world – daily. Comprehensive and qualified in-depth analysis is presented with graphics, statistics and footage. The intelligence often leads to political implications and sometimes it causes governmental crisis.

"We have managed to do our job using open sources for 200 years. I'm an investigative journalist, and the bureau I talk about is my newspaper. Welcome to the club!"

The reporter continues. He describes how he participated in writing a book that some of the audience remember well. It shocked the intelligence community world-wide when it was published. The book was about a fanatic, rich and well-organised sect with access to weapons of mass destruction. Through their world-wide network they planned to wipe out Earth. The authors describe how advanced their plans were, and how far they had actually come. The authors also describe how little the intelligence community knew about the sect.

It took the international team of journalists four months to complete the "intelligence operation" with a budget of \$150 000. Oh – and the majority of the information was acquired through open sources such as public records.

Agents, police and the military scribble plenty of notes. The reporter has their full attention. Someone asks: what could he do with a million dollars? The journalist answers with a smile: "A lot of damage!"

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Rich history

Continued from page 51

press (1830s – 1880s); protest press (1880s to 1930s); early resistance (1930s – 1960) and the later resistance (1970s – 1980s). The turning point, he credibly argues, is in the 1940s, when exclusive "petty bourgeois politics" fade in a crusade for the rights of all (1997:35).

If Switzer gives us analysis, it would probably require a different

book to delve into the colour, texture and flavour – in short, the "story" of the black press. This is not to belittle the value in his book, which sadly has had very little exposure in South Africa. A sneering review by former Rand Daily Mail editor Benjamin Pogrand did appear in the Mail&Guardian in 1997. Pogrand has his particular axe to grind. But it may be that journalists *per se* are not necessarily the best reviewers of books about journalism. They should, per-

haps, stick to what they do best: ie, researching and writing in an accessible way.

Switzer's book calls out for journalists to do their kind of story-telling about the fascinating history of black journalism in South Africa. Any volunteers out there?

South Africa's Alternative Press: Voices of Protest and Resistance 1880 – 1960 edited by Les Switzer. Published by Cambridge University Press.

Targeting the Editors

Continued from page 40

"Silence is for the drug lords what water is for the fish," says a visiting Colombian editor. We are going to raise some hell. Maybe we can make them think twice before they try to shoot one of us next," says Rossana Fuentes, chief of the special assignment staff at Reforma in Mexico City.

Contraband from South America crosses the 3 000 km long border of Mexico on its way to the biggest drug market in the world – the US. With Juárez, Tijuana with its population of two million is the largest metropolis in Mexico for drug traffickers.

If you are a serious, critical, investigating journalist you must sooner or later write about the wide-spread corruption. A pair of interfering traffic police costs 20 pesos. The brother of the ex-president costs more than a \$100 million.

If you start digging you will inevitably embark on a collision course with the narcotics business. Still alive? Then you have nine lives, luck, a bullet-proof vest and military protection. Or else you're not too strict about the truth – out of the will to survive – or in for the money. If you're untouchable you're probably already dead.

"Some say I'm crazy. But I have to go on," says Jesús Blancornelas who is healing from the bullet wounds that almost put an end to his ability to walk for ever.

Crazy or not, he is a source of inspiration for a new generation of Mexican journalists who distance themselves from

bribes, self censorship and blind loyalty to the government.

Twenty heavily-armed elite troop soldiers and special force policemen guard Blancornelas' humble middle class villa. The security police and military secret service have confirmed that one of the drug syndicates still has a hit order on the editor.

Blancornelas sold his house to start Zeta in 1980 with his best friend, the columnist Hector "el Gato" Félix Miranda.

They wrote in-depth stories about drugs and corruption, issues that the government-controlled press didn't dare write about.

Félix was murdered in his car in April 1988. Thousands of people demonstrated against the attack and against the careless way in which the authorities handled the case. Journalists who criticised the investigation through other media were fired or put under pressure.

Zeta's examination of the murder led to the arrest and imprisonment of two killers. They worked on a race track owned by the son of a powerful politician. The police were never able to clarify any motives for the crime.

Even today Zeta is printed on the American side of the border to make sure it comes out every Friday.

Behind the newly-built 10-foot tall brick wall Blancornelas is planning "Proyecto Tijuana". The idea is that Blancornelas will lead about 20 Mexican and foreign reporters on an intense investigation into the drug mob and corruption. Blancornelas slowly massages one of his large bright red scars. Mexican journalists need to create their own life insurance. "If I don't do it someone else has to take over. It is extremely important to speak and write about the truth in this country. There are many newspapers, but very few are truly independent."

His spine is damaged, but not broken.