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# Book Reviews

**Open Source Intelligence in a Networked World** by Anthony Olcott. London and New York, Continuum, 2012. 304 pp. Cloth, $100; paper, $29.95.

One of the dirty—or clean—secrets of modern intelligence is that most of the information needed to analyze many of the most important questions is publicly available, or at least is not contained in confidential messages. Intelligence services, however, are built around the mission of stealing and keeping secrets. This tension is at the heart of Anthony Olcott's exploration of the U.S. government's use of what is known as "open source" information. With 10 years' experience as a practitioner and a previous academic career, he is very well positioned to illuminate current practices, future trends, and earlier precedents. He gives us an instructive if sometimes idiosyncratic tour of the landscape, one that will be valuable to both novices and intelligence experts.

Building on the growing academic field of "propaganda analysis," at the start of World War II, the United States established the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) to translate and analyze foreign broadcasts (later expanded to print media). Skeptics then and now argued that this could tell us only what enemies wanted to reveal, but as Alexander George's *Propaganda Analysis* showed in looking back at what FBIS had done, in fact these broadcasts could be mined for valid and valuable information.

Building on George, Olcott shows that this conclusion is even more true today. This is not to say that secret information is irrelevant, but we are more often dealing with mysteries—questions whose answers are not yet determined and whose determinates do not lie mainly within official papers. What secrets could the Central Intelligence Agency steal that would help us predict the future of, for example, the Arab Spring?

Indeed, since the outcomes may be highly contingent, there may not be a good answer to be had. Whether or not there is, most of the relevant information is public, or at least not kept in government safes. This would be true even had the Internet and social media not been invented, but they have been, with the attendant explosion of information. The

obvious problem is not its scarcity, but its unfathomable extent, which presents opportunities and challenges to intelligence that are both enormous. Although some of the tools the government uses are presumably classified, they are surely based on those in commercial sectors, which, in turn, may have been developed in part through government seed-money. Not only do we have more information, but the role of the audience, never completely passive, is now much greater as individuals and groups play a larger role in sending information and choosing what they will see or hear.

The challenges are technical, intellectual, and political. As all of us know, search engines and automated systems are necessary if we are to cope with information overload, but they have to be based on human thought, and often produce misleading results. Academics, journalists, and intelligence analysts cannot do a decent job unless they master these tools, but even the best ones have their failings. As Olcott shows, equally daunting are the intellectual barriers, since individuals, organizations, and cultures bring with them their mental frameworks that guide and mislead in terms of the information sought and the questions asked, as well as the answers that are given. Within the government, organizational politics enters in as well, of course. The comparative advantage of intelligence services lies in their ability to collect and analyze secret information. For them to fully utilize open sources is thus extraordinarily challenging. Ironically, without access to recent intelligence products, we cannot judge how well the United States has risen to this challenge, but nothing that Olcott or others have written gives great confidence on this score. His book is a fine way to begin understanding the problems and the opportunities.

ROBERT JERVIS
*Columbia University*

**American Force: Dangers, Delusions, and Dilemmas in National Security** by Richard K. Betts. New York, Columbia University Press, 2011. 384 pp. $29.50.

Richard Betts has written an extremely important book that is probably the best critique of the prevalent bipartisan thinking on post-Cold War foreign policy produced to date. It is based on a collection of modified essays that the author has penned over the years. But it nonetheless holds together very well as an integrated work with a clear and cogent theme—that the United States has a deeply rooted tendency to intervene too much, use