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Intelligence Services on Social
Media: Explaining Citizens'
Perceptions about Information

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Abstract

Over the past decade, many public institutions, including intelligence services, have made extensive use of social media to reach out to citizens. Great scientific attention is given to the way intelligence agencies share information about their activities, seek to improve transparency and accountability, or content. However, we know very little about what happens at citizens' end, when the information reaches the users. This paper addresses this gap in the literature and analyzes how citizens perceive the information shared by the intelligence services on social networks. We use Romania as a single-case study and the semi-structured interviews conducted in December 2020-January 2021 with citizens of different socio-demographic profiles to explain the variation in how they understand the information and how they assess its content. The paper aims to test the explanatory power of several variables such as attitudes toward security or exposure to the media. The paper also controls several socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, education, and medium of residence. The results reveal that the citizens' perceptions are influenced by a combination of general attitudes regarding the intelligence services.

Keywords

social media, intelligence, perception, information, Romania

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Introduction

The world in the 21st century is a place where communication is a crucial mechanism exploited to the maximum by all people and lately, by almost all institutions. Social media is now one of the most important drivers of this process. Developed under the influence of globalization and technological acceleration, the changes brought by this new form of interaction are profound and visible in many aspects of the nowadays society.

When the society develops new forms and methods of communication, such as social media, the public institutions need to be able to adapt to these changes. Citizens and governments are increasingly living in digital today (Clarke & Margetts, 2014), while open data have changed the outlook for transparency and accountability of governments around the world. Public institutions are becoming more modern and the intelligence services are no exception (Sir David Omand GCB 2010).

Intelligence services worldwide are now reinventing themselves in a dynamic way, embracing the changes brought by social media. They live in a world of secrets while the rest of society does not (Petersen 2019), their work is still associated with a sense of mystery, obscurity and clandestine behavior while the societies are, thanks to social media, more open than ever, more connected and their citizens more demanding.

In a modern democracy, in order to be fully operational, the intelligence services require public support and trust (Dumitru 2014). Citizens' trust is a key asset and social media can be the right tool for intelligence services to promote transparency, accountability, responsibility and, at the end of the day, to bring citizens closer, to build their trust and gain their support.

Past literature has addressed and discussed the changes that social media has produced at the level of government agencies (Macnamara and Zerfass 2012; Degaut 2016; Su et al. 2017; Johnson and Kaye 2015) or the way in which the communication is used as a strategy to achieve goals such as transparency and an increased participation (Gunawong 2015; Allaste and Saari 2019; Carlsson and Nilsson 2016). However, we know little about how information services use social media as a method of communication and especially about how citizens perceive this communication. In this article, we will shed light into this very important aspect. Using semi-structured interviews, we will investigate the way Romanian citizens perceive the presence of the biggest intelligence agency (The Romanian Secret Service – SRI) on social media (Facebook) and the way in which the information shared on this Facebook page reaches them.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. The first section addresses the changes that social media has made to intelligence services. Then I will briefly outline the research design of the study with an emphasis on case selection and data methodology. The third section contains a brief introspection on the Romanian Intelligence Service social media page, followed by analysis and interpretation of the findings. In conclusion, we will summarize the key results of my study.

The intelligence services in the social media era

Social media started as a personal communication an entertainment tool used by individuals but has evolved as a popular marketing tool used by institutions and organizations. The changes that social media brings to the intelligence communities can be divided into three categories: (a) changes to the intelligence process (Bechmann and Bowker 2019; Bury and Chertoff 2020; Hijzen 2021), (b) technological changes (Resnyansky 2010; Warner 2012; Herman 2003) and (c) changes related to their image, the way they communicate and present themselves to the citizens.

It is not a secret that intelligence services are checking us on social media. The emergence and development of this environment have led to an explosion of information. In this context, a new intelligence collection discipline (INT) began to be more relevant and useful. Coined by Sir David Omand, the term Social Media Intelligence (SOCMINT) describes a type of intelligence that focuses on the collection and analysis of information available on social media (Omand, Bartlett, and Miller, n.d.) which can be used by state actors to improve a safe and secure environment, as well as by private actors who can formulate better strategies. Using SOCMINT in the day-to-day work of intelligence communities is both an opportunity and a challenge for the intelligence community that needs to manage a context of increased intense expression of the individual in the online environment. The advantages and disadvantages of using social media intelligence are numerous: SOCMINT provides large amounts of data and information, involves low cost but in the same time, serious overloading problems or major errors (Ivan et al. 2015; Trottier 2015; Werbin 2011; Dover 2020). Although the changes brought by this new form of information collection are important, we will not go into more details as they are not the subject of our paper.

The technological changes that the intelligence community must take into consideration while using social media are related to the tools and programs used by the services in the process of collecting and analyzing data and information from social media. The intelligence community must provide the necessary tools to assist the analyst in analyzing the “sound” and getting rid of „the noise”, the unnecessary information. These tools allow intelligence services to structure the

overly chaotic information that comes from social media. In this situation, intelligence services should be aware of all technological developments that can be helpful in their work. New tools and technologies will also change the nature of the staff involved in these activities.

For the purpose of our paper, the most relevant change that social media brought to secret services is related to the redefinition of the relation between them and the public they serve. New media provides institutions with the opportunity to engage in conversations that allow them to tell and elaborate its stories or key messages to the general public in an interactive way (Christensen and Cornelissen 2011). Communication aimed at the public has been an almost absent topic in the intelligence studies, but with the development of social media, who provides secret services with a “voice”, this can be changed. Intelligence agencies can use social media not only for collecting information and providing better security but also for achieving a variety of goods, such as informing citizens, sharing relevant information, creating awareness or building a community (Díaz Fernández 2009).

As communication improved and spread so did the need to inform people. The revolution of information changed not only daily lives, but also the interactions between intelligence agencies and citizens. Citizens expect governmental institutions to disclose information about them and their operations (Degaut 2016). Because of the nature of their operations this is not something that intelligence agencies can easily do. A gap between the outside expectations and the capacity of institutions to actually meet these expectations creates a performativity gap (Petersen 2019), that might lead to a crisis of legitimization. This gap can be easily approached by a proper communication with the citizens. While much of what is done by this kind of institutions must remain classified, not everything is secret. Social media, with its features and popularity offers a great chance for intelligence service to address this gap and speak more with the public about things that are not secret.

In this context, intelligence agencies need to develop strategies and models for the use of social media technologies to achieve transformation and address the needs of citizens. One of the most common strategies is to create accounts on popular social networks as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram and use them as a megaphone to send large amount of information to a large public (Parsons and Lepkowska-White 2018). As a result, intelligence communities all over the world are now present on social media.

The literature that discusses the impact of the social media on communication strategies of the information services and the relationship with citizens is quite poor. Few studies have

focused on this topic (Landon-Murray 2015; Petersen 2019). In a special issue, Karen L. Petersen discussed the goals and ways secret services understand communication with the public. According to her study, intelligence services have two ways of maintaining the relationship with the public. (1) The first one is communication as awareness. This means speaking, publishing and making actions visible in the name of democratic accountability. Communication as awareness is an attempt to strike a balance between a rulebound logic of procedures, on one hand, and the constant need for judgement on what is safe, on the other. It avoids the creation of myths around the work of intelligence services while clarifying all the misunderstandings. (2) The other way is communication as advice or risk communication has the purpose to send warnings and advices, regardless of the threat, to help the citizens make informed decisions about actions, prevents threats and offers citizens the right responses to a specific situation.

Both communication as awareness and communication as advice are types of communication that can be and are easily shared through social media. They establish a strong connection between those who share the content and the user who comes into contact with that content. With relatively low costs, valuable information, which is sent in a more informal tone, can reach a wide range of citizens from different parts of a country with various ages and backgrounds. These positive developments are transformative because intelligence services now have a chance to boost public knowledge, accountability and to show those they serve that they can be transparent. This new form of public relations is quite a shift, and arguably provides the most robust and direct interface between intelligence services and the public they work for (Landon-Murray 2015).

Data collection and analysis

Methodologically, our study is constructed using the interview method as the primary method of data collection. To find out the citizens' perceptions about the Romanian Intelligence Service and their Facebook page, we conducted 20 semi-structured interviews in January and February 2021. We selected Romania as a single case study because its intelligence agencies have an active presence on social networks (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter). Moreover, we focused on the case of the domestic intelligence service—SRI, since it is the biggest intelligence agency and the most popular in Romania (Davidescu 2014; “SRI - Intrebari Frecvente,” n.d.).

We conducted interviews consisting of 10 questions by which we tried to determine, in depth, what is the citizens' opinion about the Romanian Intelligence Service and, especially,

about its presence on the social networks. We considered that this method offers us the opportunity to understand the complexity of opinions and views related to this topic. In terms of content, the interview aimed to find out what type of social network the respondent uses, why they use it, the level of trust they have in public institutions, their objective knowledge about SRI and of course their general opinion about the content posted on the FB page by the Romanian Intelligence Service. (Appendix 1 presents the complete interview guide).

Table 1: The Themes and Examples of Coding

Major themes	Codes / subthemes	Quotes
The content of the SRI Facebook page	Respondents are familiar with the SRI Facebook page and content	„I know they have a Facebook page. I liked it and I am following it. I really like their posts because they have a very nice message. In the sense that they are not posting standard messages, they're smart. It's a bit funny and they give you food for thought. It's very nice.”
	Respondents are not familiar with the SRI Facebook page and content	„I don't know. I didn't even know they are on FB. I thought it existed because who doesn't have the Facebook page is a bit lost, so somehow I thought they did, but I wasn't sure.”
The usefulness of a Facebook page for SRI	Communication with citizens	„Nowadays, it is mandatory for such an institution to use social networks as a tool because almost all of us, everybody is on FB. From my point of view, it is a very simple way of sharing information”
	Rebranding. Creating a new image	„They can present themselves, more human and closer to people. They can share a new image about themselves. Their funny posts helps them to be more accepted and appreciated by the general public.”

We interviewed members of the general population with variation on age, sex and education. Participants were identified by one simple criteria: persons who are familiarized with social media and use it every day. The profile of our respondents was diverse. We interacted with adults (18-59 years old) that come from several parts of Romania (Cluj, Alba, Bucharest, Dolj, Satu Mare, Zalau) and have different studies and different occupations (Appendix 2 provides an overview of the participants). The data collected represents the views of females and males, with rates of 40% and 60% respectively. The interviews were conducted both by phone and face to face. The answers we received helped us to explain the citizens' vision related to the communication aspect of an institution known to be hermetic, secret and not very friendly.

For data analysis we will use an inductive approach. This requires understanding the participants' views and experiences in the specific context of our study. The thematic analysis involves the implementation of codes and themes within the data. Table 1 presents two major themes identified in our interviews.

The Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI) Facebook page

The Romanian Intelligence Service (Romanian: *Serviciul Român de Informații*, abbreviated SRI). The Romanian Intelligence Service is the main domestic intelligence service of Romania. Its role is to gather information relevant to national security and hand it over to relevant institutions, such as Romanian Government, presidency and law enforcement departments and agencies ("Serviciul Roman de Informatii," n.d.). In 2013, the Romanian Intelligence Service launched an official Facebook page. The attention that the page receives is shown by the 163,729 people who pressed the "like" button and 169,823 people who follow (in March 2021) the content shared on the page.

The content shared on the page varies and can be classified into various categories that verify the ideas of Keren L. Petersen (communication as awareness and communication as risk). One category refers to awareness. SRI is the Romanian authority in cyber intelligence so they launched a campaign to educate citizens about the risks of the online environment. Many posts discuss the fake news phenomenon and teach users how to keep their bank accounts safe or their online activity away from criminals. Others focus on the agency's functions and press releases. Information on annual reports is posted on Facebook, as well as on various events at which the institution participates or organizes. Frequently, the administrators of the page share information about recruitment and job offers within the service. Last, but not least, the Facebook page of the

Romanian Intelligence Service posts for each important holidays (Christmas, New Year, the 8th of March, the Romanian version of the Valentine's Day, the Hero's day and others). Usually, they are sending their best wishes through pictures with messages that easily become viral (Muresan 2018; Serescu 2021). The frequency of the posts is constant. At least two posts are made in each month on the topics discussed above.

The Romanian Intelligence Service uses its Facebook page for communicating awareness and also for risk communication. SRI understands the power that social media has and chooses to approach the citizen using the features offered by Facebook (Not only Facebook. The Service has accounts on Twitter, Instagram and more recently, on LinkedIn). The Facebook page of the service proves how an institution that mainly deals with secrets can improve a relationship with its servants.

Analysis and Results

The analysis of the interviews we conducted reveals that the vast majority of those interviewed know that SRI is present on social media. When being asked to describe the content that the page promotes, respondents encountered difficulties. Most of them remembered the holiday wishes and did not pay too much attention to other types of posts:

My opinion is a good one regarding the content; I couldn't help but notice a hint of amusement. Every post seems to be well thought out. They managed to capture my attention and I might say that the graphs are often very nice. I don't have information related to other types of posts. I only remember those from the 8th of March or Dragobete (R.L).

We believe that this is especially important for the SRI, which must balance the funny posts with the educational posts. Posts related to awareness should reach users just as the funny ones reach them. The risk of the institution to move from a harsh, hermetic, mysterious image to one that is too playful or too relaxed is high, especially in a context in which the level of trust in public institutions, no matter which they are, is very low.

Other respondents have more complex answers. For example, C.B has an elaborate idea about the content shared by SRI on the Facebook page. In his opinion, the posts that SRI promotes can be divided into three broad categories: (1) posts shared around the national holidays and he brought into discussion the latest New Year post, (2) ads about future recruitments and also (3) posts related to prevention and education. For the last category, C.B remembered the posts in which SRI is teaching the public about phishing threats and online behavior.

Some respondents, even though they are using social media for their information, they are not aware of the fact that SRI has a Facebook account. Some of them are very clear in their responses. For example, H.B. explains that “I know nothing about their page. I remember seeing posts for the Police page”. Another respondent S.M argues that “I didn’t know that they have a Facebook account”. Others are more intuitive: “I don’t know. I didn’t even know they are on Facebook. I thought it existed because who doesn’t have the Facebook page is a bit lost, so somehow I thought they did, but I wasn’t sure” (K.B).

After reviewing all the answers, we can say that there is a difference between young respondents (18-22) and the older ones in terms of knowledge about the content of the page. Unlike the older respondents, who know more details about the Facebook page, the young people declared that they don’t know very much about it. This is explained by the nature of the social networks that young people use today. It is found that the youngest spend a lot of their free time on social networks like Reddit and Tik-Tok (where SRI is not present) and less on Facebook and Instagram. Their lack of activity on Facebook therefore determines the lack of information related to this aspect.

We also identified that respondents who are more aware about the functions of the intelligence agency (know what SRI is doing) are more connected and are following more the social media account. We came at this conclusion after reviewing and connecting the answers from the question about the content with the question where we test the objective knowledge of our respondents in regard with the main objectives or tasks that the Romanian Intelligence Service has. Here we identified a difference between the young respondents and the older respondents. We saw that younger respondents (18-22) have less objective knowledge about the intelligence agency while those who are older, no matter the educational background, know more about what SRI is doing. This happens because as you get more mature, the knowledge about the institutions and their role increases. Based on these findings, we can say that: age and objective knowledge about this institution influences the amount of information users have on the SRI Facebook account.

The other relevant aspect that we believe is important in order to understand the citizens’ perception of intelligence services that have accounts on social networks regards the way the users understand the benefits of this kind of interaction. Asked if they think it is useful for SRI to have a Facebook page, our respondents have the same positive answer, no matter how much knowledge they have on the agency or how much they interact with the page. When they are asked to

elaborate why do they think this is useful, the arguments they give are different. Some of them believe that a Facebook page is a good way to communicate with the public and to inform them in various matters while others believe that this is a great tool for marketing a new image for the agency.

The majority of our respondents believe it is a necessity for an institution as the Romanian Intelligence Service to have a Facebook account. They see the network as a great way for a public institution to communicate, connect and inform the public. Some of them believe this is a necessity because it is crucial for public institutions to send information via channels that reach the public: “Nowadays, it is mandatory for such an institution to use social networks as a tool because almost all of us, all the citizens, are on FB. From my point of view, it is a very simple way of sharing information” (C.C). Other believe that an official Facebook page is a good place to get official information: “It is very good for the citizens because in this way, citizens get information from an official page. If it is an official page, it means that the information is official and useful for those who read it” (C.F). Another point is expressed by the fact that the institutions in the security area are absent from the communication with the citizens and this can be harmful to our national security: “Social networks are used extensively by almost everyone and therefore the security area must be strengthened on these platforms because it could help in assessing security risks and vulnerabilities” (A.B).

Another argument that is brought to justify the importance of being present on social media is the idea that the Romanian intelligence agency needs a new image. Some of our mature respondents specified that Facebook can be a great way to erase the idea that the current intelligence agency is nothing different from the institution that served the communist regime: “In addition, a presence on social media platforms helps a lot in creating a new brand and adapting the institution to current perceptions. It makes us forget about the Securitate” (A.M).

In Romania, the intelligence culture is in an extremely fragile foundation because of the repressive apparatus that the communist state built and promoted. Securitate, the colloquial name given to the Romanian intelligence service, was an omnipresent and omniscient intelligence institution that had total control over the population (Dumitru 2014). In this context, it is clear why our mature respondents who have in mind the negative perceptions of the Securitate, see social media as an effort that SRI is undergoing in order to erase that image and create a new one.

Other respondents who consider that using social media will bring positive effects on the image of the intelligence agency also bring forward the argument discussed in the theoretical part of our study. Those mature respondents see social media as a way for secret service to be more transparent and closer to the public:

They can present themselves, more human and closer to the people. They can share a new image about themselves. Through their more comical posts, it helps them to be more accepted and appreciated by the general public" (R.B). „Sure, they won't tell us what they're working on or doing, but they can tell us what we need to hear and what is important for us to know about them (G.L).

Following this logic we can say that age and objective knowledge influences the way people see the usefulness of this page.

Conclusions

In the last decade, intelligence agencies understood that social media, with all of its features, can be a great instrument through which they can address the gap between working in secret and being transparent and accountable. As other governmental institutions, intelligence agencies decided to launch, via social media, a new communication channel that helps the achieve the goal and be more present in the society.

Although much scholarly attention was paid to the ways social media is redefining the intelligence services, too little was discussed about what citizens believe about the intelligence services that have a social media account. This paper tried to address this gap. Using the case of Romania and its biggest domestic intelligence service we saw that, usually, citizens are aware of the fact that SRI has a constant presence online. Because of the differences between generations and the way they use social media, we can say that age and objective knowledge about SRI models the amount of information that citizens have about the Facebook page of this institution.

In terms of usefulness, no matter how much information citizens have about the content of the page, it is safe to say that everybody believes that having a Facebook page is a way to communicate with the public while working to enhance a new image for an institution that had a negative background. Age and objective knowledge about SRI are factors that influences how people perceive the presence of SRI on social media.

In the end, we can say that the intelligence services have made necessary headway towards democracy by choosing to be on social media. Social media offers them a chance to

change the cliches profoundly rooted in the collective mind and provide them with a voice to communicate with those who are serving. At the other end, citizens are feeling respected and are enjoying the fact that they are one click away from their intelligence agencies.

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Appendix 1: The interview guide

1. What are the social networks you use most often?
2. You mentioned that you use Facebook, do you remember the last events you watched on this social network?
3. How much do you know about what SRI does on Facebook? How often do you access the SRI Facebook page? What is your general opinion about their page?
4. Do you usually like their posts? Have you ever commented / shared any posts that belonged to them?
5. What is your opinion about SRI?
6. Why do you think it is useful for SRI to have a Facebook page?
7. Do you know what the main tasks of the SRI are?
8. How do you appreciate the activity of SRI? How do you think they developed in the last years?
9. How much trust do you have in public institutions in general?
10. What do you feel about your personal security now? What about the Romanian national security?

Appendix 2: Overview of the participants

Interviewee	Age	Gender	Education / Occupation	Location
A.B.	44	Male	MA degree / Legal officer	Bucharest
A.M.	34	Female	MA degree / Economist	Cluj
B.C.	40	Male	MA degree / Construction engineer	Bihor
C.C.	19	Female	Highschool / Student	Bacau
C.B.	34	Male	MA degree / IT specialist	Cluj
C.F.	49	Male	Military education / Law enforcement	Cluj
F.M.	53	Female	Highschool / Registrar	Alba
F.P.	42	Male	BA degree / Freelancer	Dolj
G.L.	58	Male	Highschool / Mechanic	Cluj
H.B.	19	Female	Highschool / Student	Cluj
H.D..	22	Female	Highschool / Commerce	Cluj
I.N.	19	Male	Highschool / Student	Neamt
K.B.	25	Male	BA degree / IT specialist	Satu Mare
L.I.	35	Female	BA degree / Accountant	Satu Mare
M.C.	26	Female	BA degree / Accountant	Maramures
R.L.	23	Female	Highschool / IT specialist	Cluj
R.B.	40	Male	BA degree / Engineer	Neamt
S.M.	28	Male	BA degree / Engineer	Satu Mare
P.V.	36	Male	BA degree / Engineer	Bucharest
Z.S.	19	Male	Highschool / Student	Zalau