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Spies Form Virtual Units on The Fly to Track Terror

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By James Gordon Meek

When a cell of 10 Islamic militants stole into the Indian port city of Mumbai in November and began to unleash a fusillade of hell on two hotels, a train depot in rush hour and a Jewish center, US spooks scrambled to make sense of it all. About 20 analysts from across the globe immediately convened - not in the same room, but on two classified Web sites called Intellipedia and A-space.

Think of it as Wikipedia and Facebook for spies.

The first Mumbai entry was posted by a watch officer at the National Counterterrorism Center at the onset of the attacks, officials told The Mouth. Soon, analysts from across America's 16 spy agencies familiar with extremists in India and Pakistan logged on to A-space - a discussion site accessible to only a few thousand US intelligence analysts with the highest security clearances - to weigh who the attackers might be.

Analysts posted realtime satellite imagery and video depicting the carnage outside the Taj Mahal Hotel, which showed a sluggish response by Indian security forces. They also uploaded the first news photos of one young terrorist in Mumbai's rail station who was later nabbed alive - noting how professionally he carried his weapons, and how he was dressed as blandly Western as the 9/11 hijackers 7 1/2 years ago.

The ad hoc group of analysts, who did not all know each other - including at least one in a Far East military outpost - quickly agreed that a claim of responsibility by the unheard of "Deccan Mujahadeen" was malarkey. It was really the handiwork of Pakistan's Al Qaeda-affiliated Lashkar-e-Taiba.

"The analysts concluded it was LeT hours before that was made public," said one senior US intelligence official.

The Mumbai strikes were the first big test of the new system of collaboration using social networking tools put in place last fall by Directorate of National Intelligence chief technology czar Michael Wertheimer and his crew of savvy young spooks from the Myspace Generation. There are also Top Secret elements modeled on YouTube and Flickr.

Read more about A-space and Intellipedia after the jump.

One participant in the A-space Mumbai discussion even posted an ominous message titled, "Next Mumbai: Indian Mujahadeen." That terror group, typed the analyst a few days after the massacre of about 200 Indians, Americans and westerners, "has now threatened to carry out attacks on Mumbai, Agencies reported."

While about 20 analysts were active in assembling, discussing and dissecting incoming intelligence and news reports on the mayhem which unfolded over three days, other simply watched and read. The sites logged more than 7,000 page views.

To avoid a repeat of politically-tainted intel on Iraq prior to the 2003 US invasion, policymakers and politicians are strictly banned from getting access to Intellipedia and A-space. About half of the roughly 9,000 intel analysts with high enough clearances have signed up to use it, officials said.

“There’s a lot of expertise and accumulated knowledge that doesn’t fit easily on a piece of paper,” Wertheimer told The Mouth in a recent interview at the DNI’s Liberty Crossing complex in Virginia.

Besides tossing around theories with other analysts, the users - who cannot post anonymously - plunge into secret databases previously off-limits to other spy agencies, though intel from the most sensitive human assets is verboten, he said. “What used to take months is taking days. What used to take hours is taking minutes,” Wertheimer added.

Analysts now compare notes from across the continent - or oceans - about targets such as Chinese submarines and North Korean and Iranian nuclear facilities. But the biggest and most heavily-trafficked A-space page is devoted to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, where the US is battling the Taliban and hunting Al Qaeda leadership, one source said. Another page set up to collect intel on potential threats to President Obama’s Inauguration events also attracted interest, when assets such as GoogleEarth imagery and other information feeds were added.

“The last time there was an Inauguration (in 2004), you couldn’t look at realtime traffic cams,” marveled one official involved in the new program.