



Talking with Journalists and Analysts about the Ethics of Open Source

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Ask any analyst or journalist about a time when they were uncomfortable during decisions on whether or not to publish something based on open source information. Everybody has a story.

In February 2019, an analyst monitoring the conflict between India and Pakistan discovered satellite-imagery evidence that suggested an Indian missile strike had missed its target of a terrorist camp, despite India's claims that it had successfully destroyed the camp. The analyst had to decide whether sharing the findings could contribute to "real-world escalation pressures" and potentially increase the risk of war between India and Pakistan.¹

Stories like this preview observations from a series of interviews the Stanley Center for Peace and Security held with analysts and journalists working with open source information to track nonproliferation and international security policy. Over the last year, the center partnered with the Ethical Journalism Network to interview stakeholders for their stories and perspectives on the ethics of working with open source information.

Overwhelmingly, it seems like those interviewees are ready to tell those stories and begin discussing ways to improve the ethical practices in open source analysis.

Common Challenges

Analysts working with geospatial and open source data have capabilities that not long ago were exclusive to states. The open source analysis community has demonstrated that it can craft

intelligence products, break news, add evidence to reporting, and provide accurate information to the public on issues critical to peace and security. ABC News aired Landsat and SPOT images of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster within a week of the accident—one of the earliest uses of satellite imagery in a breaking news story.² In 2002, before Google Earth launched, analysts at nonprofit organizations were using satellite imagery to uncover major developments in Iran's uranium-enrichment program.³

In June 2021, when news of a new Chinese ICBM field **broke in the Washington Post**, that story featured **analysis** done by a talented undergrad with easy access to wide-resolution and high-cadence satellite imagery. It is becoming common, even expected, to see open source analysis and satellite imagery alongside major news stories. With those kinds of analyses come stories of how analysts and journalists had to navigate ethical dilemmas with potentially global consequences.

There are few opportunities for analysts to discuss these ethical dilemmas. In 2019, the Stanley Center partnered with Open Nuclear Network to convene **The Gray Spectrum**, a workshop for analysts working with geospatial and open source data to discuss the ethical challenges they encounter in their work. Conversations revealed that most analysts had personal stories of ethically complex situations they had faced, often with no support or training in how to navigate the decision. There was an appetite for further investigation.



What We Are Hearing

Beginning in 2020, the Stanley Center partnered with the Ethical Journalism Network to conduct a series of interviews of 20 analysts and eight journalists who use geospatial or open source data in the context of their work on international security. Through this project, the Stanley Center and the Ethical Journalism Network hope to increase awareness that dealing with ethical challenges is a real, common problem in the open source analysis community and share some of the tools and processes analysts use to navigate those challenges.

A full report on the interview project is forthcoming. But here is a preview.

Ethical Challenges in Open Source Analysis

When we asked analysts about ethical challenges they perceive in their work, a few themes emerged:

- **Tension between speed and quality:** Many people felt that pressures to quickly publish their findings limits their ability to review their analysis as thoroughly as they would like. In an industry closely tied to the news cycle, a quick turnaround can be essential for an analyst to maintain professional standing. Adding to that, once a newsworthy image is released or shared on social media, there is pressure to publish sound analysis quickly. One journalist we interviewed described their experience facing one such situation:

“Every news agency was gonna get commercial satellite imagery and look at what had happened...so maybe I'm incentivized to go ahead and publish, because this is gonna get published anyways and I'd rather have my analysis shape the public discourse rather than some other journalist who doesn't necessarily spend as much time working on geospatial issues.”

- **Privacy and safety:** Both journalists and analysts talked about privacy concerns when it comes to open source data taken from users on social media platforms. Using photos or posts from an individual's social media accounts in a published analysis could put that individual, or others depicted in photos, at risk of harm if they could be identified as the source of the information, particularly in authoritarian environments. These challenges are also important for journalists when it comes to protecting their sources.
- **Unintended consequences:** Many analysts we spoke to worried that their published findings could be misconstrued to push political narratives. Some also raised concerns about inadvertently aiding the groups they sought to analyze—for instance, analysts using open source information to monitor North Korea's missile sites could accidentally provide useful information to their subjects by publicly detailing their monitoring methods and data sources.

- **Vicarious trauma:** Several analysts mentioned their worries around the potential psychological and emotional impact of **vicarious trauma** as a result of repeatedly viewing graphic and violent material in the course of their investigations. The strongest concerns were voiced by individuals in management positions, who grappled with the ethical implications of asking their staff to view such material.

The people we interviewed felt the burdens of the kinds of ethical dilemmas described above. And they seem genuinely interested in resources to help navigate those dilemmas.

But there are gaps and blind spots in community stakeholders' ethical practices. We heard stories of individuals handing off their analyses to management or customers, assuming they would handle the ethical challenges. Some analysts, like those collecting raw or lightly processed imagery at the specific request of another person or organization, did not feel empowered to make ethical judgment calls or felt it was not their responsibility.

In interactions between analysts and journalists, ethical considerations tend to fall through the cracks. Some analysts expressed a sense that once they provide their findings and evidence to a journalist for a story, the ethical responsibility shifts to that journalist, who will have greater control over the story. While none of these examples should be taken as representative of the field as a whole, they point to a trend: when ethical responsibility is shared between collaborators in an unclear way, it is too easy for each party to assume the other is responsible for managing any ethical challenges.

Navigating Ethical Challenges

There are few resources that support analysts in navigating these situations. A handful of organizations have a code of ethics to guide staff decision making. Most organizations do not. Analysts, including those tracking in the nonproliferation and international security policy fields, generally lack the agreed-on ethical standards of more-established fields, such as the tradition of journalism ethics.

Instead of relying on support from their institutions, many analysts said that when faced with an ethically challenging choice at work, one of the key steps in their decision-making process was to reach out to trusted peers in the field for their take on the situation. While this could mean speaking with a superior at the analyst's own organization, more often analysts reported reaching out to peers at other organizations, former colleagues, or mentors to talk through their decision and its potential consequences. Analysts felt that discussing their dilemma in detail with another analyst helped them organize their thoughts and more clearly assess the potential consequences of their decision, even if the discussion was not explicitly framed as an ethical analysis. The majority of interviewees described using these informal review processes rather than formal procedures.

Too often, analysts treated accuracy as sufficient for ethics. When asked about how they navigate ethical challenges, analysts gave answers that described how they seek to ensure the accuracy of



their analysis, fortify its credibility, and defend from being misrepresented or used in misinformation. Accuracy is essential for analysts and journalists, and the pursuit of accuracy can serve ethical practices. But verifying the accuracy of one's analysis is a different task from assessing the ethical implications of that analysis. That distinction may need to be made more clear. As one interviewee put it, their organization's "mission is different from journalism—it's not truth, it's not newsworthiness, it is peace and stability. So we choose not to publish some things."

Working Toward Solutions

Following this summary, the Stanley Center and the Ethical Journalism Network will publish a full report that stimulates more discussion of observations from these interviews.

From these interviews, it is clear that analysts and journalists are interested in more resources and support to enhance their ethical practices. Several interviewees suggested that any available class or training in geospatial and open source analysis should include some instruction in ethical decision making. While many of today's analysts are largely self-taught, incoming generations of analysts will

benefit from the slowly growing availability of professional training and higher education courses that teach skills in open source analysis. Incorporating training on how to navigate an ethical dilemma, such as via the **Markkula framework** for ethical decision making, into existing education and training opportunities will help prepare rising analysts to face ethical dilemmas in their work.

At a broader level, analysts working with open source information may need to draw inspiration from other fields when it comes to developing clear and agreed-on ethical standards. Journalistic practices and codes of ethics offer a useful starting point for nonproliferation nongovernmental organizations and analysts to consider their own standards and guidelines.

This Discussion Takeaway summarizes the primary findings from a series of interviews the Stanley Center for Peace and Security held with analysts and journalists working with open source information. It should not be assumed that every interviewee subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

Endnotes

¹ The analyst in this case chose not to publish the findings.

² Dwayne Day, "Shooting the News from Low Earth Orbit," *Space Review*, January 6, 2014, <https://www.thespacereview.com/article/2429/1>; Nell Henderson, "Civilian Satellites Penetrate Soviet Secrecy, Photograph Plant," *Washington Post*, May 2, 1986, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1986/05/02/civilian-satellites-penetrate-soviet-secrecy-photograph-plant/8a2de19f-c539-4a4b-a5ec-45638fde660a/>.

³ See interview with Corey Hinderstein in *The Deal*, "Episode 1: The Revelation," by Jeffrey Lewis, Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, September 8, 2020, <https://www.middlebury.edu/office/deal-podcast>.



About Us

The Stanley Center for Peace and Security partners with people, organizations, and the greater global community to drive policy progress in three issue areas—mitigating climate change, avoiding the use of nuclear weapons, and preventing mass violence and atrocities. The center was created in 1956 and maintains its independence while developing forums for diverse perspectives and ideas. To learn more about our recent publications and upcoming events, please visit stanleycenter.org.



About the Ethical Journalism Network

The Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) is a coalition of more than 70 groups of journalists, editors, press owners and media support groups from across the globe and is growing. A registered UK charity, EJN is supervised by a Board and an international network of advisors. EJN supporters represent many different cultures and media traditions, but they share the conviction that the principles of ethical journalism are universal and a precious resource that builds respect for democracy and human rights.

