www.baltimoresun.com/technology/bal-te.md.spybook04mar04,0,2709017.story

baltimoresun.com

NSA joining social network for intelligence analysts

Thousands can share secrets, tips, professional gossip

By David Wood

March 4, 2009

The super-secret National Security Agency, traditionally reluctant to share its code-breaking secrets, is joining a new, highly classified social network that links its analysts for the first time with thousands of colleagues at other U.S. intelligence agencies.

Gone are what used to be those rock-solid paradigms of intelligence: providing information only to those who need to know and limiting access to locked, specialized "compartments."

Until now, a Pentagon analyst working on Afghanistan, for instance, might not know about highly sensitive NSA intercepts of opium smugglers discussing payoffs to Taliban insurgents.

For those struggling for answers within their own compartments and agencies, "it was tough noogies," said Maj. Gen. John DeFreitas, chief of analysis for the NSA.

But now, in what amounts to a major culture shift among spies, "need to know" has become "need to show," DeFreitas said in an interview at NSA headquarters at Fort Meade.

Starting this month, NSA analysts will be able to post their photo, phone number and e-mail address on a secure, Facebook-like page accessible only to senior analysts at 16 other U.S. intelligence agencies. They will be able to search databases, post drafts of reports for comment or send around perplexing intercepts with a note that says, "Anybody have any idea what this means?"

They will be able to collaborate with analysts at the FBI, the State Department or the Defense Intelligence Agency working on similar problems, and they will be able to identify an expert with knowledge they lack. And, like any teenager, they can use the system to text-message suggestions, tips and professional gossip.

The system was launched quietly last fall by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the civilian secretariat that oversees all of the nation's spy agencies. But it has taken the National Security Agency until now to swallow hard and join in.

"It breaks every policy they have," said Michael Wertheimer, chief technology officer for the Director of National Intelligence and a Columbia resident who was the driving force behind the initiative. "But the leadership gets it."

This highly secure network, called A-Space (the "A" is for analysts), was born from the recognition that the nation's intelligence agencies held pieces of puzzles that no one was able to assemble quickly, if at all.

The problem became painfully obvious after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, when investigators discovered, among other flubs, that an NSA intercept in 1999 had identified two of the prospective hijackers, Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi, but the information was never acted upon because it was not widely shared.

That a solution has taken until now is a testament to the spy agencies' suspicion of outsiders and the reluctance of the federal government to take up 21st-century technology.

A-Space connects about 7,000 of the roughly 10,000 U.S. intelligence analysts who have the requisite above-top-secret clearances.

"We are slowly pulling everybody into the 21st century," said Rebecca Thompson, 23, a social software contractor for the Director of National Intelligence.

Counterintelligence agents, whose job is plugging leaks, sniffing out "moles" and preventing breaches of security, were initially skeptical of if not horrified by the notion of A-Space.

Aside from top-secret intelligence, the network catalogs the government's top experts by subject, and by detailing the projects they're

working on, demonstrates what they don't know. In the hands of foreign agents, such information would be a gold mine.

DeFreitas scoffed at such security concerns.

"We had similar arguments when the police started using radios," he said. "The fear was, criminals would listen in and stay ahead of the cops."

Some skeptics were soon won over by one feature of A-Space: It records everyone's movements through the network. Every user can see what everyone else is looking at and where they have been browsing. An Africa analyst who suddenly starts opening files on Cuba will attract notice.

Political appointees and policymakers are denied access to A-Space to encourage honest collaboration among career professionals and to speed analysis.

When the Mumbai terrorist attacks occurred in December, experts from across the intelligence community immediately convened in A-Space to share what they knew and what they were hearing about the incident in India.

In another instance, an analyst puzzling over images purporting to show a new Chinese submarine posted them in A-Space for comment. A reply came soon from another analyst who knew nothing about China or submarines but was an expert in Photoshop. It was a fake, he advised: The shadows were mismatched.

"In the old days, I might have spent six weeks working on a project only to find somebody else already had the answer," said an NSA analyst who asked not to be identified.

Despite such enthusiasm, A-Space is not an unqualified success. Only a few who have tried the system use it regularly.

"We see a lot of interest, but we have a lot of trouble getting people to come back a second time," Wertheimer said.

Neither have all of the firewalls between agencies been breached.

"There are still barriers, legal barriers and a natural disinclination to share information," said Tim Finan, a computer scientist at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County who leads Air Force-funded research on software that encourages information-sharing while maintaining high levels of privacy and security.

For Wertheimer, just getting the A-Space network up and running was difficult.

Government technocrats twice created experimental software that he threw out as "ugly" and "unfriendly."

Then came the culture problems unique to each spy agency, problems deeper than the fact that officials at DNI all wear suit coats in their offices while NSA employees tend toward sports shirts and no ties.

The NSA had legal problems to solve: Because the agency is not allowed to collect or store data on Americans, how can its analysts have access to FBI files, for example?

For now, DeFreitas suggested, some databases will simply be walled off.

"We have a huge responsibility to protect Americans' privacy," DeFreitas said. "At the end of the day, some stuff still will be compartmentalized."

Discuss this story and others in our talk forums

Most recent **news** talk forum topics:

- **Obama Thinks Yer Stoopid~ [Nation/World]**
- **Has there been a MAJOR purging here? [Local]**
- **What's The Best Internet Service For Wireless ? [Computers/Technology]**

More news talk forums: Local | Nation/World | Business | Health/Science | Computers/Technology