

# Q&A: Wagner mutiny and social media as a source of information for intelligence services

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Many people were using social media to follow last weekend's march on Moscow by the Wagner mercenaries. And they weren't the only ones:

intelligence services were also watching with great interest. What kind of information do they obtain from social media and what are the advantages and disadvantages?

Livestream videos of the march, Google Maps images showing the location of the Wagner mercenaries and journalists reporting on their advance gave a clear picture of what was going on in Russia last weekend. While it was interesting for anyone wanting to keep a close eye on the news, [intelligence services](#) have also been using social media as a source of information in recent years, says Willemijn Aerdts (Institute of Security and Global Affairs). This relatively new method of gathering information is known as socmint (social media intelligence).

Aerdts is an expert in the field of intelligence services. In the war against Ukraine and the rebellion of the Wagner mercenaries, the services try to keep track of the fighting forces. They also try to find out what the parties want, what they can do and what their intentions, capacities and activities are. What is actually happening? Social media can help to answer these questions.

## **What kind of information do intelligence services obtain from social media?**

Maps and photographs give them insight into troop movements and help them to find out what's going on. The services also use social media to gain a picture of who is communicating with whom, which makes it possible to identify networks. And the invisible side of social media, the metadata, is used as well. It allows intelligence services to see, for example, where someone was when they uploaded a certain post or where a photograph was taken. Another possibility is to create a fake account, so that services can get involved in discussions.

## **What are the advantages and disadvantages of gathering information via social media?**

The advantage is that you have quick and easy access to a lot of information. On the other hand, the disadvantage is that a vast amount of information can arrive in a short time and anyone can post anything on social media. You need to be able to verify the sources in time and analyze the information if you want to do anything with it.

Another disadvantage is that [social media](#) is an important channel for spreading disinformation. In the war with Ukraine, for example, Russia sets up false flag operations to shift the blame for certain atrocities onto Ukraine. This is one way that Russia tries to influence public opinion.

## **What have you yourself noticed recently about the intelligence services in Russia's war against Ukraine?**

Since the very start of the war, both the American and British intelligence services have been very open about what's happening. The British publish an update every day. Services never reveal anything without good reason; there's always a motive behind it. I think they're doing this to separate sense from nonsense. It's well known that Russia often spreads disinformation and the intelligence services might be aiming to counteract that. They could also be wanting to show Russia that they understand what's going on: that they know Russia is doing something or preparing something. Sharing information can therefore have several purposes. The openness we're seeing now is actually something I've hardly ever seen before on this scale.

Provided by Leiden University

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