Mining open sources: Businesses "prospect" the media for competitive advantage

By Dan McCue

The phone calls – an abbreviated but intense vetting – began about a week before the heretofore anonymous delegation was due to arrive in Charleston, S.C.

Through a random series of events I had discovered that the Emirate of Dubai was about to invest more than $20 million in a knot of parcels adjacent to Interstate-95 in the heart of the state.

At the time most of the lots were covered in sod, which was "farmed" and sold to the developers who were then slapping up residential communities as fast they could to profit from the booming demand for housing in the Sun-belt.

But Jafza International, a subsidiary of Dubai World, the global investment company for Dubai's royal family, had entirely different intentions for the land. Instead of sod, they wanted to raise a distribution hub on the 1,340-acre site, which is located about mid-way between New York and Miami.

"You found us," said Mark Dennis during the first of a series of conversations, most of which occurred late in the evening, east coast time. "That, in large part, is why we're willing to talk to you."

Like all subsequent early communications, the conversation was one-part icebreaker, one-part a gentle probing: a sizing up not only of the reporter, but also of the lay of the local social and political landscape.

Still smarting from its treatment at the hands of American legislators during what later became known as the Dubai ports controversy, what Dennis' employers seemed to most want to know – in advance of a more public disclosure of their intentions – was whether the state, and by extension, the United States – would be welcoming or hostile to an Arab state's expanding its footprint here.

The situation was especially sensitive because the distribution center would directly serve the Ports of Charleston and Savannah, two of America's busiest ports and place squarely in a prime position in the nation's commercial supply chain.

Dennis had clearly done his homework, knowing not only who the political players were -- including House Majority Whip James E. Clyburn and Gov. Mark Sanford – but even who the local "community advocates" were.

"Does he have a constituency?" he asked of one, evidently alarmed by what on its face had seemed to be a rather innocuous article in a local newspaper.

Consensus reporting: The more you read, the less you know

Dennis, a former journalist who has covered wars and conflict zones in Kosovo, Algeria, Chechnya, Iraq, the Gulf, Sudan, Lebanon and Israel/Palestine, has devoted much of the last decade to mastering the art of mining "open source" information.

Since leaving the profession, he's been chief communications advisor for Terje Roed-Larsen, the Norwegian diplomat who from 1999 through 2004 was United Nations special envoy to the Middle East, and worked for Bell Pottinger, the global consultancy, before setting out on his own as a provider of specialized business intelligence services.

Over the past several years his boutique service has proven particularly adept at handling and staying ahead of the curve in crisis and high-stakes situations. Today he continues to serve as a trusted consultant for DP World, the large, diversified company owned by the Dubai's royal family.
"As a journalist I recognized that dailies and wire services put pressure on their reporters just to get the story of the day out," Dennis said. "That led to an editorial system that relied on building stories around official sources, and ultimately led to a consensus of reporting.

"I was writing on a weekly deadline at the time, didn't have the daily pressure, but what I did have – due to the consensus of reporting – was the feeling that the more I read, the less I understood," he continued. "What worked for me was gathering empirical information on the ground."

To illustrate the danger of relying on the conventional wisdom, Dennis went on to recall his experience in Kosovo before the outbreak of the war in 1998. Driving in the countryside, he saw tanks lined up in a defense position and troops digging in. He called his editor, telling him what he had seen and wanted to report, but was rebuffed.

“He said, ‘No, I have a story from our State Department reporter that says it’s all a bluff.’ I thought, ‘Okay, that’s classic journalism, listening to official sources rather than going out and thinking for yourself,” Dennis recalled.

Within days, Kosovo was as war. Soon, Dennis had moved on, and was working in the Middle East Policy Office of the United Nations. The office relied in part on a daily briefing, a translation, of what was appearing in the Israeli press that morning.

“I said, ‘How can you possibly trust it? The newspapers are only reporting what they find newsworthy on any given day, and then you’re having it translated by someone who might apply his perceptions and biases to what’s being reported,” Dennis said.

In time, however, Dennis said he came to see that the daily briefing contained a treasure trove of information.

“What I realized is that even smart people, when reading a news story, are reading for information,” he said. “They are not looking for disinformation. They are not looking for how they are being misled by officials. They are not looking even for how they are being misled by their own biases.

“So I really got to thinking about this, kind of through the prism of my cynicism; and I began to think at length about how stories are concocted; how what I actually saw and what was published was often at great variance.

“At some point during my time in Jerusalem, I stopped reading the media and cleared my head completely,” he continued. “Then I found I was able to really start analyzing the briefings. My analysis was much better.”

Reality was ever-present, Dennis said, but only if one were willing to delve beneath the surface of what was being said.

“If something in the information I was being presented caught my attention, then I’d mine all the way down and try to see how the story unfolded, from source to publishing. And I would only believe the information in stories that I could determine was provable. A bill passed, fine. A hurricane struck, fine.

“The consequences of what happened and why it happened? That’s opinion and conjecture. It may be provable and it may not be,” Dennis said. “In a sense, the media began to provide me with tips to where the disinformation lies.

“Today, anything I read in the media I read with the assumption that it’s false – unless I read something that’s provable, something I can accept as fact. Then at that point, I start to question what’s going on,” he said.

Getting down to the unknown unknowns

Something about what Dennis said brought to mind former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld; more specifically, Rumsfeld's his almost instantly notorious discourse on "known knowns" during a February 2002 media briefing.

"As we know, there are known knowns," Rumsfeld said. "There are things we know we know. We also know, there are known unknowns. That is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know."

"Rumsfeld got a lot of flak for that, but what he was saying was actually based on intelligence thinking," Dennis said. "What it comes down to is basic intelligence analysis, and open source is part of that game.

"Once I realized that that, intuitively, was what I was doing, I began to get a little more rigorous about it, and began to read a bit more about it and about the psychology of intelligence analysis."

Dennis described a big part of his work process as "pattern analysis," identifying where patterns develop and where divergence occurs.

During the Dubai ports controversy in 2006 – it was Dennis who famously advised CNN to 'tell Lou Dobbs to shut up' – the consultant reviewed scores of reports on the controversy and the debate over port security; he said it quickly became very clear how members of Congress stood on the issue.

"In politics you're dealing with people who all have very limited time and sometimes have some serious biases," he said. "The more time I spent focusing on political game, the more I started to see how congressional staffers have created a very simplistic communications style, and briefing their bosses on the top five or 10 questions they might be asked.

"Judging from what they were saying to the media, I could tell who was using the same talking points and who wasn't," Dennis said. "Taking the analysis a step further, I would then look at the tone of the rhetoric. If someone was using 'attack-minded phrases,' I knew they were engaged in battle. If they were saying more 'policy-wonky' things, I knew these were the people who were engaged in trying to find a policy solution to the controversy.

"If you break down your analysis that way, you come away with an almost foolproof predictor of what's going to happen," he said. "Through this empirical type of reporting and analysis, you can determine whose belligerent and attack-minded, and whether or not they're interested in producing a policy or playing policy."

Another key technique is beginning one's analysis with a MacGuffin. The phrase was popularized by the director and producer Alfred Hitchcock, and not surprisingly, it's a technique that is often employed in movie thrillers.

Think of the MacGuffin as the central focus in the first act of a film, a focus that declines in importance as the motivations and actions of the characters play out.

"In the movies a MacGuffin often leads to a surprise - - things might not be what they initially seemed – but it you need to have a reason to have that journey within in the film. It's the same with information for a client.

“Once you figure out your MacGuffin and start following it, you start to see patterns emerge,” he explained. “And then as each of those patterns emerge, you mine further and further down until you arrive at an actionable assumption. It might not have any relation to where you started, but your MacGuffin got you where you needed to go.

“Having that kind of information was very important to my clients,” Dennis said. “In short, by doing deep analysis, you’re not just giving your clients information; you’re providing them with a decision-making apparatus.”

What’s changed is the explosion of technology

Of course, “open source” itself is nothing new.

As pointed out by Stan A. Taylor, Emeritus Professor of Political Science at Brigham Young University and a former senior staff member of the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, “open source information, meaning material gathered from non-classified sources, has always been an important source of information to the intelligence community.”

What’s changed is the explosion of technology, the headlong lunge in just two-decade’s time from the emergence of desk-top computers to Twitter, Facebook and being “declared” the king or queen of… well, wherever, via Foursquare.

“When I used to have access to intelligence information, I noted that items from the New York Times and Washington Post often found their way into the National Intelligence Daily (NID) that I received, hand delivered, each morning,” Taylor said.

“Today, I’m sure, those kinds of citations proliferate because the internet has made collecting that information so much easier,” he said.

But what’s really different – and what set the stage for practitioners like Dennis – is the expansion of “open source” intelligence into the business world, and even the proliferation of the intelligence community’s once-shrouded “sources and methods.”

Put simply, sources and methods define the process, which starts with asking, ‘Why are we collecting this information?’ “Who will use it – and how?’ “And what do they want to know?’

Then there’s the added step – the method – of deciding how best to collect the data and how it will be validated.

“When information is provided to a CIA case officer by a senior official in a foreign government, the CIA goes to great lengths to protect the identity of that source,” Taylor said.

“The skills and competencies necessary to perform sound analysis of any data are the same in the private sector as in the government,” Taylor said.

Matt Asay, vice president of business development for Alfresco Software in Salt Lake City and a former student of Taylor's, went a step further, describing the intelligence and commercial realms as on par when it comes to vital nature of open source intelligence collection.

"As communications has moved online, virtually all relevant business intelligence is hidden (or openly) available there," he said.

Which begged the question of where the best open source information can be found; not surprisingly, Google's ubiquity makes its primacy a no-brainer.

"Google has the most pages and the most links," Asay said. "It is the system of choice for everyone but Microsoft.

Somewhat off-handedly, he added, "The company with the most data wins. Google, therefore, wins."

Simply put, but that left a lot of details to be unearthed. One way to do that was through Google, which, with the typing a few select woods turned up PDFs of the U.S. army's Open Source Intelligence Interim Field Manual, the NATO Open Source Intelligence Handbook and scores of government, university and Think Tank reports on the subject.

For the human dimension, I next turned to Gregory F. Treverton, a senior analyst at the Rand Corporation in areas of intelligence, terrorism, law enforcement and U.S.-foreign relations.

Treverton is also the author of several books, including *Reshaping National Intelligence for an Age of Terror*, a follow-on to his earlier *Reshaping National Intelligence for an Age of Information*, published by the Cambridge University Press, and *The Next Steps in Reshaping Intelligence*, published by RAND in 2005.

"I've bumped into 'open source' intelligence gathering a lot over the course of my career, and what I can say with certainty is that we've gone from a situation during the Cold War where we have too little information -- but thought of it as reliable -- to a situation where there's now too much information and the bulk of it is considered not very reliable," Treverton said.

"Open source, in fact, has become as ubiquitous as the air we breathe," he continued. "And while it's not clear how important open source analysis is to corporate decision-making, we're seeing a proliferation of people who now do it for a fee, like Oxford Analytica and Eurasiannet.org."

Offered a brief thumbnail describe of Dennis' work during the Dubai Ports controversy, Treverton said the he found the strategy intriguing.

"Traditionally they, or an entity like them, would just hire a lobbyist," he said.

At the same time, the situation reminded him of a request he received a few years ago while in the midst of a project he was doing for the CIA.

"We were engaged in a process of getting their analysts ahead of the curve and therefore, prepared for the future, when they asked us to include a forecast element, a kind of horizon scanning, in the first half of the planning process," he recalled.

The challenge was that when it comes to government intelligence, closed systems – rather than a kind of open, all expansive horizon scanning -- are the norm. According to Treverton, a lot of businesses have a similar self-limiting view.

"Most companies don't do a very good of this [kind of intelligence gathering], and to the extent that they do it, it's typically just looking at their commercial sector," he said.

For example, IT companies looking at other IT companies and other developments within their industry.

"Because that's a self-limiting view, I'm not sure how effective these intelligence-gathering efforts are," Treverton said. "Where you do bump into 'open source' intelligence, it usually is a lot more operational. It's 'How do we avoid disaster in the Senate?' or 'How do we assess the climate in country X?'"

At the CIA, an agency that grew up on material that comes to it through its classified networks, intelligence analysts are far less positioned to be out on the Web and looking for things, something, Treverton said, that grows out of a fear that if they did, people would know what they were searching for."

Nonetheless, as Treverton made those observations, he was in the middle of a project looking at how and why various government agencies use or don't use social networking platforms like twitter and Facebook.

"In government intelligence, the use of these platforms is completely counter-cultural," he said. "It goes against every operating habit. Mostly, those engaged in government intelligence efforts, don't want to participate, and those that do use, say, twitter, are forced to do so outside, in their cars in the parking lot."

Again, the concerns can be boiled down to traceability.

"If you have an account, it has some kind of name attached to it, somehow, someway, it could be traced back to you," Treverton said. "Now, in all honesty, the intelligence community is divided on this. The people who developed Intellipedia, for instance, the classified wiki, believe the CIA ought to be out there, participating on Twitter and Facebook, gathering information. But that's a minority view."

However, that attitude may be in retreat. In a 2007 speech, Doug Naquin, head of the U.S. Open Source Center within the CIA even went so far as to describe YouTube as an "honest to goodness" source of intelligence.

Although RAND was initially slow to embrace corporate open source research projects – a byproduct of its long history of defense-related work, Treverton said – over time its experts began to see more and more overlap in terms of what corporations wanted.

Today, Treverton said RAND's work for corporations in this area is "episodic," and mostly for the very big firms, like ING, the Dutch banking giant, and huge utilities.

"It's been hard to sustain work in that area," he admitted. "At various times we discussed potential partnerships with firms like McKenzie or Kissinger Associates, offering our expertise to clients of theirs who wanted something other than a quick and dirty approach to open source information gather, but nobody was interested in that in-depth approach."

Now, however, it appears attitudes are beginning to change.

Pockets of resistance remain

As social networks and Web 2.0 have come to dominate much of the popular discussion about technology, people have become increasingly more intrigued about how to search and mine the Web for intelligence; their goal, to gain a strategic and tactical advantage in a globalized world were rapidly changing circumstance take on a life of their own.

Dr. Calvin Andrus, of the CIA's Office of Application Services explored the idea in The Wiki and the Blog, a 2005 paper in which discussed how U.S. policy-makers, the military and law enforcement now "operate in a real-time, worldwide decision and implementation environment."

The result, he said, is a tremendous – and required – compression of response time in a given situation compared to even a generation ago.

He credits the rise of "self-organizing knowledge Web sites, Wikis, information sharing Web sites and blogs" as providing the critical mass for that transformation.

So pervasive has the Internet become that a proposal to create a new, open source analytic arm of the government was among the issues identified in presidential transition brief prepared for the then-incoming Obama Administration in 2008.

It said in part, "In today's world, the key to intelligence and timely decisions is collecting and analyzing information from varied, open sources including Internet blogs, electronic publications, chat rooms, and video Web sites."

In response, said Treverton, "more and more businesses – particularly multinationals – are doing some open research and analysis," but there are also pockets of resistance, companies where managers maintain that twitter and Facebook and surfing the Web are distractions and productivity killers, and something that should be done on an employee's own time.

"The reality is this stuff is coming on," Treverton said. "You ignore it at your own peril"

The problem, after stuffy managers, is that for all the search engines and content analysis tools that are out there, determining what information actually means still comes to down to an analyst's judgment.

"Validation is always a challenge," Treverton said. "The problem is the ratio of noise to valid, actionable intelligence. As a result, people tend to fall back on, 'Has this person been right before?' and 'Are they in a position to know?'"

Defining influence

The goal, of course, is to understand the world around the organization and also the mindset of decision makers and thought leaders.

In a 2006 paper on the changing nature of NGOs around the world, Rachel Thompson, a regional director at APCO Worldwide, the London-based public affairs and strategic communications firm, neatly summed up a formula Dennis uses to this day: "Influence = narrative + networks."

On one level then, open source analysis helps to determine, who to watch, who to try to influence, and who's just contributing to the background noise of a debate.

It's the vehicle to knowing what information to act on, and which can be safely ignored without leaving the enterprise open to strategic surprises – those unwelcome arrivals that have a huge impact while challenging the conventional wisdom – the official future – of the organization, and leave it grasping for a response.

These then, form the basis of "intelligence requirements."

The question becomes: What are the assets needed to win, and when do strengths become weaknesses, and vice-versa?

At this point, it's illustrative to look at the experience of the U.S. Army, which, like many businesses, operates in diverse operational environments around the world.

In Iraq in 2005, the U.S. army's 3rd infantry division established an open source intelligence team consisting of five interpreters and a steady flow of radio, television and newspaper reports.

The U.S. Army's Open Source Intelligence Interim Field Manual defines an open source as any person or group that provides information without the expectation of privacy. "The information is hiding in plain sight, and is not protected against public disclosure," the manual says.

"It can be lawfully be seen or heard by any observers. The means of collection are unobtrusive," it continues.

Their office had one television set, which gave them access to local and international cable, one lap top, a radio, and 15 daily newspapers which were reviewed each day. They also relied on a video tape machine to review confiscated propaganda and other media.

Each day, team members followed a three-step process: collecting information, analyzing its value – in their case a big early priority was establishing the true relationships between individuals and organizations – and producing actionable assessments.

The idea is to get around secondary sources of information – flacks and spokespersons – who can intentionally or unintentionally add, delete, modify or otherwise filter information they make available.

Interpreters were deemed necessary because in a globalized world, sources may convey one message in English, for U.S. and Western consumption, and a non-English message for local consumption.

The manual also stresses the importance of knowing the background of the open sources being used and the purpose of the information being disseminated. This is critical to distinguishing objective, factual information from that which lacks merit, contains bias, or is part of an effort to deceive the reader.

Research underpins everything, but the point isn't just to collect the information; it to analyze everything from relationships between key players, the environment in which you are operating, the personal and expertise of the entity you're competing against, the time available to take action, and "outside" or civil considerations.

The analyst's task is to consider all desired ends, then look further at undesired effects or outcomes. A recurring theme in the work is 'What are the unanswered questions?'

The field's texts also hold that good analysts know that "Why" questions put the task in context by describing the reason for performing it.

A critically important goal is to identify subtle modifications in a speaker's message.

The magic is entirely in the interpretation. The whole point is to provide sufficient warning to preempt or otherwise moderate the outcome. The process depends on continuous monitoring of world events and specific activities to determine probabilities of this action.

Analysts then take the gathered information and use inductive reasoning to reach a general theory about the meaning of patterns in an event or series of events under scrutiny. Deductive reasoning is then used to prove or disprove the theories and shoot down mistaken assumptions.

Intelligence architecture

According to the NATO Open Source Intelligence Handbook, the Internet is now the default intelligence architecture for virtually the entire world.

"What is new about OSINT (the intelligence community's trendy synonym for open source) is the confluence of three distinct trends: first, the proliferation of the Internet as a tool for disseminating and sharing overt information; second, the consequent and related "information explosion: in which published knowledge is growing exponentially; and third, the collapse of many formerly denied areas.

Like the U.S. Army's handbook, the NATO guide offers a series of rules and guidelines, not the least of which is determining the origin of the information collected and the degree of trust that can be assigned to it.

The handbook also warns analysts to distinguish between what is known and what is being speculated about – a task it describes as crucial – they also place an emphasis on the compiling of a complete description of where the open source information was acquired, identification of the source, and the timing of the information's production.

"Without the sourcing pedigree, the open source substance must be considered suspect and of minimal value," the handbook said.

Interestingly, the NATO handbook includes a fair amount of discussion of the internet as a vehicle for open source information trolling.

Among the questions it poses to analysts are 'Is the information that is provided consistently accurate based on other sources?' 'Are the sources of information presented on the Web site clearly identified?' "Does the source demonstrate a degree of influence?' "Do other media cite the Web site in their reporting? And, 'Has the source been attacked electronically or in official government statements?'

It then goes on to offer a few cautionary thoughts. For instance, it states that the use of free Web hosts such as Geocities.com or Cybercafe.com often suggests that there is limited financial support for a Web site and the organization backing it.

The handbook also cautions against being too impressed with hit meters or counters, which is says "can provide some limited indication of a Web site's influence, thought these can be misleading."

Other questions raised in the NATO handbook include, 'Does the Web site correspond to a known advocacy group?' 'Does the site represent individuals or an organization?' 'Does the site claim to speak for the organization?' 'To whom does the Web site link?' and 'Who are its chosen 'relevant links'?'

"These direct to a community of interests that share similar interests or views," the Handbook said. "An evaluation of those links can further illuminate the views of the web site authors."

Social media is a listening tool

Among those who have given considerable thought to the role of Web 2.0 in intelligence gathering is Sree Sreenivasan, Dean of Student Affairs and professor at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism.

"Most people thing of social media as a broadcasting tool. But it's also a listening tool and it starts by being a participant and a true participant," Srennivasan said. Getting involved in the community and watching as people participate and are getting involved is absolutely critical.

"Second is listening to many different kinds of people," he continued. "Most people follow people they already know and people they like and stuff like that, but [when it comes to intelligence] you really need to reach out and go beyond that. It's important to have diversity in who you are listening to, and also to try to find the key influencers and watching them as they comment on what's going on."

Srennivasan said it's also important to continually try to expand who one is listening to through social media.

"Part of the problem – and here I'm drawing a comparison between open source for business and open source in journalism – is that people tend to listen to folks that underline and confirm their theories," he said.

Like Treverton, Srennivasan businesses are starting to understand that something like Twitter can be an intelligence tool for their businesses.

"Unfortunately, there's also still too much buzz around social media, so you still see resistance to embracing it as a tool for thoughtful, strategic work," he said. "I believe it's possible to use social media that way, and it's what I would want to do, but it is still very early for some.

"You see, [in terms of the regard for social media], we are where radio was in 1912, where TV was in 1950, and where the internet was in 1996, meaning we all have to learn and understand how this works," Srennivasan said.

"It's changing so fast, but no one needs to feel bad that, 'Oh, it's too late or anything like that.' We're very, very early in this process and the landscape is going to continue changing and all we need to do is kind of keep up and see what works," he said.

Pattern analysis and critical thinking

Dennis made the leap to independence as a business operative when representatives of Dubai World, whom he know through Bell Pottinger, asked him to write an analysis of how it was handling the then-developing controversy surrounding the state-owned company's purchase of the British Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company.

As part of the purchase, Dubai World's DP World division had acquired P&O's management contracts of six major U.S. ports. Despite the United Arab Emirates' longstanding positive ties with the United States – U.S. warships routinely call on its Jebel Ali port to this day -- and approval of the deal by the George W. Bush administration, a number of political figures had begun to argue the takeover would compromise U.S. port security.

"I took 10 New York Times articles and I looked at them the way I'd grown accustomed to looking at media reports and essentially said, 'Here's what I think you're doing wrong and here's what's going to happen," Dennis said.

Within weeks, Legislation was introduced in Congress to delay the deal. From then until D.P. World announced it would sell the management contracts to a U.S. entity, Dennis and a team of others found themselves in crisis management mode.

"In any high stakes situation, it's vital that you guard against failing to think critically about the information that's coming before you," Dennis said. "If you allow yourself to read too much too

uncritically, you're just polluting your head with disinformation, the conventional wisdom, and you have the same stuff drummed into your head until you believe it.

"That's why pattern analysis is so important," he continued. "It enables you to figure out what's happening. When you note an anomaly, you immediately begin to ask why it's there. Paying attention to the language people are using is another key. By reading critically, you begin to notice shifts in the language.

"For example, three years ago, during the big debate over port security, I took a few days to review the media reports it was generating and looking over the transcripts from the Congressional hearings – not sitting down and pouring over every detail, but going through these quickly and highlighting what popped out to me," Dennis said.

"What I saw was that many people were using the same rhetoric, which suggested they were all being fed the same questions, the same positions. Then I made note of comments by Congressman Edward Markey, from Massachusetts."
In fact, in the spring of 2006, Markey seemed to suggest DP World's purchase of P&O's assets – including the management rights to the U.S. ports was almost beside the point. In a March 6, 2006 press release, he both used the controversy to berate the Bush administration and to push for the screening of all cargo that passes through the nation's ports.

"The Bush administration's bunging of the entire review process has exposed dangerous security gaps at our nation's ports," Markey said. "Ninety-five percent of the cargo shipped to our country's shores is not screened. This is unacceptable."

For Dennis, Markey's quotes leaped off the page.

"Many members of congress appeared to simply want to get answer about the P&O purchase and what DP World's intentions were. Markey, on the other hand, was belligerent, was on the attack, and was pushing the 100% scanning of all containers entering the country," Dennis said. "I immediately thought, 'This guy Markey is up to something else.' It was a policy play. At the same time, I also knew I had to find out everything I could about that person."

In short, Markey became the MacGuffin.

"Remember, the thing about a MacGuffin is it's a starting point, an initial lead that gets you going," Dennis said. "Typically, in this kind of analysis, it needs to be one person, or an entity, with a high enough public profile to have generated a paper trail. And remember, most over time, most organizations generate competing information that might not be useful to your analysis.

"Once you've followed that trail, and can see the individual's thought patterns and action patterns, the next step is saying, 'Okay, my assumption is this – now let me see if I can disprove it," he continued. "If you can't, then you are pretty confident in the advice you provide your client and they can plug straight into their decision-making process."

In the case of most of the Senators who were commenting on the ports deal, the controversy was an opportunity for rhetoric and spin. For Markey and a few others, it was an opportunity to put the administration on the spot and push cargo scanning legislation.

The push for scanning of 100% of the cargo entering the U.S. effectively upended and overtook the dialogue over the Dubai Ports deal. (9/11 Commission/congressionally mandated). The port security issue also provided members of Congress with some nice traction heading into the election cycle.

The situation began to bog down. The spin began to be dominated by special interests and congressional and senate staffers, those classic creatures of Washington for whom the game boils down to this: every policy is a battle of politics.

“Relying on my analysis of readily available information, I ultimately concluded that I wasn’t hearing a policy discussion, I was hearing politics,” Dennis said. “The patterns, the anomalies… I’d see something I didn’t expect and think, ‘Why did that pop up?’ ‘Are my biases getting in the way?’”

Ultimately, Dennis’s consistent evaluation and re-evaluation of what was being said and discussed in open forums – and revealing motivations effectively hiding in plain sight led him to an undeniable conclusion.

As he himself recalled, “This has evolved into rhetorical game and we should not be anywhere near this.”

Seeing beyond what’s in the public eye

By its very nature, open source intelligence only works when the entities, individuals and corporations involved have chosen to or must work in the public eye.

“A public company? Yes, it works. A terror organization? Yes. A guerilla fighting group? Maybe not,” Dennis said. “It all depends on whether the entities you’re focusing on have chosen to use the public sphere to attain their goals.”

In a competitive environment, recognizing patterns is the key to outwitting opponents.

At the deepest, level analyzing those patterns gets down to the matter of what the interests are behind what you’re hearing or being allowed to see.

“Sometimes a situation can be downright Machiavellian,” Dennis said. “What you see might directly contradict what you are expecting – you literally have to ask yourself, ‘Why are they taking a stance that appears to go against their interests? Are they trying to maintain their position or move up to something else?

“Then you get to the point where you think, ‘Okay, I know what’s going,’” he continued. “Again, the point remains don’t believe everything you hear or read, but realize it has thinking behind it.”

When Dubai chose to invest in more than 1,300 acres in Orangeburg, S.C. with the intention of developing a massive distribution, manufacturing and warehousing park on the site, Dennis undertook a less intense, but no less deep analysis of the local political terrain.

Going in, there was a need to understand South Carolina politics, past political battles over infrastructure – a high priority in any site selection process – and Congressman James Clyburn, the House Majority Whip, who also happens to represent the area.

“A lot of times you come into these things looking at a blank slate; After all, a lot of the time, it’s inconsequential to know what someone is doing until it impacts you,” Dennis said.

“Done properly, an open source analysis in such an environment is a lot like journalism; it involves finding out everything you can through information gathering, and then sitting down with someone with inside knowledge, against whom you can test your assumptions.”

“Fortunately, I had an individual who was very generous with his time and would out where the behind-the-scenes reality varied or closely tracked what we could see,” he said.

Speaking of journalism, Dennis said with consensus reporting by beat reporters being an occupational hurdle, he often looks for alternative reporting on an issue he’s reporting, and scours relevant Web sites.

“A treasure trove of information,” he said.

One source of “information” he despises is the press release, but even there, he said some useful insight can usually be gleaned – so long as you read the copy dispassionately.

“You have to understand that prior to its release this press release has usually been the focal point of an organization’s energies and can reveal a lot about its internal thinking, about internal rivalries and consensus – after all, the typical press release is written in such a way as to make everybody happy.

“Again, it’s not the text, it’s the thinking behind it that’s important,” Dennis said. “Why did they put certain information in? How does it diverge from what they’ve said in the past? Grab phrasing and see if it matches other messages they’ve put out there. Who are they working with and why?”

In the realm politics, speeches and even the questions posed during congressional testimony can reveal a tremendous amount about what’s going on behind the scenes. In fact, who’s invited to testify and the line of questioning [in a congressional hearing] reveals a lot more than the sound bites that might make it to the evening news.

“Answers are all over the map. But who’s invited to testify is interesting because they typically reinforce the chairman’s or the committee majority’s own views.” Dennis explained. “Then there are the questions themselves.

“In one case I remember a congressman used the phrase ‘moral equivalency.’ Now, that’s not a phrase people normally use in their every day conversation. People typically use a certain amount of words in a certain construct. If a phrase stands out like that from the way you know a person ordinarily speak, you know they’ve been prepped by someone.

“That’s when you say, ‘Uh-oh, what’s going on here? And ‘Who’s behind it?’” Dennis said. “In a sense, the questions themselves reveal the committee member’s entire line of thinking.”

For those who want to incorporate open source intelligence into their own work, Dennis stressed staying focused and being prepared to put the time in.

“When I’m looking at open source material, I go back at least two years,” he said. “From that sampling, patterns will emerge and then I look for anomalies in language and construction.

“Now, for the journalist, it’s not a lot more effort than the time spent reporting on an issue, but you have to change your way of thinking and that takes a little bit of effort,” Dennis continued.

“To me, as applied to journalism, open source can be a valuable tool to figuring out a good story or figuring out what’s going on when you’ve been thrust into unfamiliar territory. Of course, the way the news media is structured this would be hard for a daily beat reporter to do. On the other hand, if you’re an investigative reporter, I think it’s a great way to develop a situational awareness that’s vital to telling a more accurate story.”

Dennis concluded his thoughts on the intersection between journalism and open source with a word of caution.

“If you are just talking to people, you’re using up your time and you’re putting yourself at a disadvantage, I think. Because once you call someone and ask for something, an inevitable give and take has begun,” Dennis said. “Prepping with a deep open source effort allows you to grasp issues without having to dive into that situation.

“And again, we’re talking about an effort here that a lot different from just reading everything and downloading a bunch of material; we’re talking about a more thoughtful approach to information. And like I said, until you can clear your head and assume everything you are reading is false, it doesn’t work.”