Making an impact on security and intelligence

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Making an impact on security and intelligence

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Intelligence studies remains a small and discreet discipline that locates itself near to other disciplines such as: international studies, history and area studies, public administration, British politics, and security studies in different mixes and borrowing and utilising different insights along the way. As a discipline it has been characterised and constituted by significant issues and activities that it seeks to analyse: that of secrecy, empiricism and government security. This short essay takes a snapshot of the developing relationship between scholars and security and intelligence officials through a series of selected issues that have appeared on the horizon of the last ten years. In doing so, it argues that a good percentage of intelligence studies scholars have responded to the opportunities presented to them to impact on the policy world, and that there are further areas in which the scholarly community can add value to the policy word.

The so-called ‘global war on terror’, or ‘long war’ (depending on which term you prefer) brought security and intelligence scholars closer to the policy and security communities, than ever before, especially in the wake of the 9/11 attacks on London in July 2005 and so this explicit linkage between the scholarly community and policy work.

The debates around academic engagement with the security community are yet to be resolved. Whilst the current government yearns for scholars who are ‘more useful’ in ‘the real world’ there are undeniable tensions between the dissemination of academic knowledge into academic outlets and engagement with policy communities. There is also a large vocal community of colleagues who suggest that there should be little place for this work in an academic’s professional life. Although the unresolved questions are those which verge on ethical considerations, much as there were for anthropologists and the so-called Human Terrain System, and whether the creation of ‘pure knowledge’ is more valuable than knowledge shaped for a policy audience. The debates within the intelligence studies community are, of course, a microcosm of those that exist within the wider International Relations and Studies community, and until a coherent position is reached on the subject, individuals and groups will continue to pragmatically choose where and how to engage with the stakeholder communities they value.

The big security questions lend themselves to different access points for scholars.