

# Social media changes force OSINT practitioners to adapt

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**An apparent crackdown by social media platforms prompted concern in the OSINT community in June 2019. *Veli-Pekka Kivimäki* examines the changes that took place and assesses the outlook for the work of OSINT practitioners**

## Key Points

- Social media services are making the discovery of information on their services increasingly difficult, with June 2019 being an exceptionally challenging month because of new restrictions on Facebook Graph.
- Individual Twitter accounts monitoring military activities in open sources have come under attack and been suspended, raising transparency concerns in national security analysis.
- OSINT practitioners will need to emphasise tradecraft over tools to overcome the increasing challenges around collection from social media services.

Social media has become increasingly relevant in open source intelligence (OSINT), both for getting a ground-level view of current events, as well as for deep investigations into subjects such as terrorism and military operations. This also means that OSINT practitioners are increasingly at the mercy of social media service providers. These services are run by commercial entities, which are subject to external demands from shareholders and governments.

In June 2019, multiple events took place that negatively affected the open-source conflict monitoring community, as well as practitioners using social media. On 7 June, Facebook made major changes to its so-called Graph Search, which had enabled complex queries to retrieve public Facebook data. This meant that several popular tools – many free – stopped working, prompting practitioners and tool developers to find workaround solutions to regain some of the lost functionality.

On 6 June, US-based OSINT trainer and expert Michael Bazzell shut down the free tool section of his website inteltechniques.com, including the Facebook investigative tools that used the Graph Search feature. In a podcast on 7 June, Bazzell explained that his site had briefly been shut down by a large-scale cyber attack, particularly targeting the tools section. Bazzell explained that he had also received a demand from his webhosting provider to take down the tools, partially due to takedown demands from unspecified service providers. A closed version of the tools section still exists for subscribers to Bazzell's services.

On 7 June, the popular people search service Pipl announced that it would close its free service “on or around” 12 June. This left the paid premium service online, but it hampered investigators relying on the free version of the tool. Pipl cited abuse of the free service as one reason for the closure.



*Conceptual image of a social network under attack by a hacker. (BeeBright)*

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On top of these changes, Twitter also announced the removal of precise location tagging as a feature from some parts of the service. This change will affect search tools that use location information in tweets, potentially making it more challenging to track events by specifying a precise location.

### **Twitter OSINT suspensions**

On 18 June, several Twitter accounts tracking military developments around the world were suspended. Among them were ‘ELINT News’, with more than 34,600 followers, and ‘The Intel Crab’ with 55,000 followers. The latter is an account operated by a contributor to Strategic Sentinel LLC, a research group based in Texas, United States, with its own Twitter presence of 67,700 followers.

*Jane's* has confirmed from the account holders that in the days before the suspensions, ELINT News and Strategic Sentinel had both received notices from Twitter. These notices stated that Twitter had received ‘official correspondence’ regarding the accounts that cited violations of Indian law.

Despite the ‘official correspondence’ notice, Strategic Sentinel’s account was not suspended. The holders of the two other accounts told *Jane's* that – in addition to the official

correspondence notices – they had received another email from Twitter regarding the suspension. In these emails, the grounds for suspension were seemingly not related to breaches of Indian legislation, but to the fact that the individuals were running two different Twitter accounts, a violation of Twitter's terms.

Conversely, the open-source monitoring account 'The Intel Crab' was suspended but did not receive the notice relating to official correspondence. It is therefore possible that the suspensions were triggered by mass reporting of supposed violations of Twitter's rules. The suspended accounts were restored within 72 hours, without additional explanations from Twitter.

A common denominator for the accounts is that they all featured in a 14 May article published by the Indian news outlet *Deccan Chronicle*, which claimed that the accounts' reporting was escalating tensions between India and Pakistan and that the accounts had "Pakistani roots". Ryan Barenklau of Strategic Sentinel told *Jane's* on 25 June that it was "really absurd" to imply some sort of relationship. He said, "We are a well-established American company led by an American team." Barenklau also expressed disappointment over a lack of communication from Twitter on the issue. "We and several other Twitter users sent letters asking for more explanation but have since been met with silence."

The suspension of the open-source monitoring Twitter accounts is not the only such event in June 2019 that drew public scrutiny. In the days leading up to the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests on 4 June 2019, Twitter suspended multiple accounts critical of China's policies. This was first perceived to be a co-ordinated attack on the accounts, but Twitter took responsibility in a series of tweets, stating that the accounts had been erroneously suspended in routine enforcement actions. Twitter explicitly denied that the Chinese authorities had engaged in mass reporting of the accounts.

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