CIA'S IDEA OF DIGITAL INNOVATION: ATTEMPT (AND FAIL) TO BUY AN EXISTING NEWS SERVICE

A week ago Sunday, the WSJ reported that Twitter had cut off an In-Q-Tel funded company, Dataminr, from sharing data with the intelligence community.

> Twitter Inc. cut off U.S. intelligence agencies from access to a service that sifts through the entire output of its social-media postings, the latest example of tension between Silicon Valley and the federal government over terrorism and privacy.
>
> The move, which hasn't been publicly announced, was confirmed by a senior U.S. intelligence official and other people familiar with the matter.

Twitter spokesperson Nu Wexler told me this is actually long-standing policy.

> Dataminr uses public Tweets to sell breaking news alerts to media organizations such as Dow Jones and government agencies such as the World Health Organization, for non-surveillance purposes. We have never authorized Dataminr or any third party to sell data to a government or intelligence agency for surveillance purposes. This is a longstanding Twitter policy, not a new development.

Indeed, as CNBC reported later in the week, this has been something the IC has been badgering Twitter about since September. Just as interesting, CNBC reports that CIA's OSINT center wants the data.

> It has not been clear exactly which
> entity in the vast U.S. intelligence
> apparatus was involved in the dispute
> with Twitter, but sources tell CNBC that
> it was a division of the CIA known as
> Open Source Enterprise. According to the
> CIA's website, that unit is a part of
> the CIA's directorate of digital
> innovation. It was created in the wake
> of recommendations by both the 9-11
> Commission and the Iraq Weapons of Mass
> Destruction Commission that CIA focus
> more effort on gathering "open source"
> information — data that is available to
> anyone in the public, as opposed to
> information that can only be gathered
> through covert means.

Which raises even more questions for me about
the timing of the request, and of these
misleading claims from anonymous intelligence
officials. Why go public now? It's not like CIA
is any more popular than it was six months ago
(though it's possible the pressure is tied to
CIA's reorganization).

As far as the request, it's interesting CIA
never made this demand after the Arab Spring,
which CIA missed entirely because it was
listening to Omar Suleiman rather than watching
social media like the rest of us. That would
have been the moment to make this case (I assume
CIA and FBI both use more targeted tracking of
ISIS Twitter).

Instead, the request seems more likely tied to
the roll out of the larger organization, CIA's
new McKinsey-recommended Directorate of Digital
Innovation last October. I would have thought
that a claimed commitment to developing digital
expertise would have led CIA to set up its own
scraping system, rather than trying to purchase
the same service news outlets use (to
questionable value, according to some people
commenting on this). Unless, of course, CIA's

goal is Dataminr's "firehose," including all Americans' Twitter.

This incident ought to raise two questions: one why is CIA lying to ratchet pressure up on Twitter. And two, what the heck is the Digital Innovation Center for if this is the kind of "innovation" they're seeking?