Spy agencies now share the Wikipedia way

It is hoped that the new software will make collaboration easier.

By Greg Miller
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Washington — The CIA and other U.S. intelligence agencies have created a computer system that uses software from a popular Internet encyclopedia site to gather content on sensitive topics from analysts across the spy community, part of an effort to fix problems that plagued prewar estimates on Iraq.

The system, dubbed Intellipedia because it is built on open-source software from Wikipedia, was launched earlier this year. It already is being used to assemble intelligence reports on Nigeria and other subjects, according to U.S. intelligence officials who on Tuesday discussed the initiative in detail for the first time.

After being criticized for downplaying dissenting views on Iraq's alleged weapons programs, "we're trying to transform the way we do business," said Michele Weslander, a senior official overseeing the initiative for National Intelligence Director John D. Negroponte.

The system allows analysts from all 16 U.S. intelligence agencies to weigh in on debates on North Korea's nuclear program and other sensitive topics, creating internal websites that are constantly updated with new information and analysis, officials said.

The system, which the public cannot access, is divided into classification categories starting with "sensitive but unclassified" and ending at "top secret." The program is still being developed, officials said, and has not replaced procedures used to create intelligence reports for President Bush and other policymakers. But it is being used to assemble preliminary judgments for a National Intelligence Estimate on Nigeria and may replace unwieldy methods for creating such reports.

"I think in the future you'll press a button and this will be the NIE," said Michael Wertheimer, assistant deputy director of national intelligence for analysis.

The system is based on the software used by millions of Internet users to create encyclopedia entries at http://www.wikipedia.org. But unlike that largely anonymous environment, individuals who add material to pages on the intelligence system must attach their names to their contributions.

More than 3,600 analysts and other intelligence officials have registered to use the service since it was launched in April, officials said.

In a meeting with reporters at the office of the director for national intelligence, officials showed how analysts from multiple agencies had used the network to post frequent updates on recent events, including the crash of a small plane into a New York City apartment building last month and North Korea's test of a missile in July.

Officials said they were not making the network available to members of Congress or other policymakers, largely because of a reluctance to disseminate material that analysts view as a work in progress.

The officials acknowledged some concerns, including the possibility that making sensitive information available to more intelligence officials could increase the possibility that secrets might be leaked to the press. Partly because of this, they said, detailed information from satellites or human sources is being kept off the system.

But they said that disseminating information more widely was key to avoiding mistakes like those that contributed to incorrect assessments that Iraq had stockpiles of banned weapons and was pursuing a nuclear arsenal.

One official said that dissenting views that were treated as footnotes in prewar estimates on Iraq would be much more prominent on the new system, and that doubts about sources would probably surface earlier and be more difficult to ignore.

"It moves us away from homogenized intelligence," said Sean Denny, a CIA official involved in creating the new system.

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