Spies, lies, and algorithms:
the history and future of American intelligence

No, it is not a suspense story about adventures of intelligence agents, it is a highly evidence-based academic text examining different issues related to American intelligence. Who would have thought that it has the same power of engaging a reader as the best spy novel or film?

I have chosen this book for reading and reviewing as I still remember how I have enjoyed the book Covert and overt: recollecting and connecting intelligence service and information science (Williams et al., 2005). Besides, the title promised connection to the acute problems that information science is dealing with today – misinformation, power of information infrastructure and algorithms, possibly information management.

I got more than I have bargained for. A.B. Zegart is a professor of political science and has a long-standing interest in intelligence work, more concretely in American intelligence institutions and their activities. But she reflects on them in a wider context of mass media influences on audiences and professionals and political context of American society. Besides, she writes well, her style is lively, most of her academic findings (interesting for me as they are) are accompanied by colourful stories of intelligence achievements and failures, battles of different intelligence services against each other and suspense of some crucial moments of recent history. American intelligence agencies are in the centre of the story, but their allies and adversaries, such as Russian intelligence, feature prominently in the text. Some text is directly connected to present war in Ukraine and some events preceding its hot phase, which concerns my own country and the rest of Europe.

Of course, the book is not meant for information professionals and many of its pages have no bearing on any of our concerns. But when reading it with information science perspective in mind, one is astounded by overlap between the problems these two professions face: document management, access to information and documentation, its limitations, acquisition of information and assessment of the trustworthiness of the sources, citizen intelligence enabled by modern technology, dealing with cyber threats, launching social media campaigns to affect behaviour of people in certain ways, leaking information, media influence on audiences and information behaviour of professionals and lay persons related to consumption and use of intelligence. Internet and other digital technologies have affected both professions and have become a double-edged sword – providing a powerful tool for creating and gathering information, but also for proliferation of deception and cybercrime. So, we face the same highest concern – security of vulnerable cyberspace that belongs to everyone, is affected by everyone, can be brought under ruthless control and at the same time is completely uncontrollable.

The book consists of ten chapters, each related to a particular aspect of intelligence work and its relations with society. It would be difficult to name the ones that I liked best: maybe the second one on spytainment and its influence on public (and even professional) understanding of this specific activity; or the fifth one on seven deadly biases, which, believe it or not, plague modern research work as much as intelligence; or the ninth one about everyone tracking nuclear weapon movement, which reminds of citizen science and crowd sourcing in some weird way. But when I check the content of other chapters, they seem to have captured my attention equally.

The book is not as extensive as it could seem from the page count. In fact, the main text consists of 276 pages, the rest of the book is occupied by extensive notes to each chapter, selected reading list and an index. The acknowledgements part is also quite extensive and most informative.

I would recommend this book to my colleagues who are eager to broaden their professional horizons and learn about different approaches to the same problems that we face in our everyday work, but especially, for researchers who would be interested in some unexpected turns of thought generating interesting research problems.

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Reference

Williams, R.V., Lipetz, B.-A., Taylor, R.S. and Horrocks, N. (2005). *Covert and overt: Recollecting and connecting intelligence service and information science.* Scarecrow Press.