

Communicating with the Public in the Digital Era: An analysis of Romanian Intelligence Services' Social Media Presence in 2024

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Rezumat: Acest articol explorează prezența serviciilor de informații pe rețelele sociale, utilizând netnografia ca metodă de cercetare. Studiul se concentrează pe prezența online a Serviciului de Informații Externe (SIE) și a Serviciului Român de Informații (SRI) pe trei platforme cheie: Facebook, Instagram și LinkedIn. Prin analizarea conținutului, frecvenței și a modelelor de interacțiune ale postărilor, cercetarea identifică strategiile folosite pentru a comunica cu publicul, a spori transparența și a promova obiectivele instituționale. Rezultatele evidențiază rolul rețelelor sociale în cultivarea încrederii publice, implicarea unor audiențe diverse și abordarea provocărilor precum dezinformarea și preocupările legate de confidențialitate. Acest studiu contribuie la înțelegerea modului în care serviciile de informații se adaptează tendințelor de comunicare digitală, păstrând în același timp echilibrul delicat între secretul operațional și dialogul cu publicul.

Cuvinte cheie: platforme social media, servicii de informații, comunicare digitală, Serviciul Român de Informații, Serviciul de Informații Extern

Abstract: This article explores the presence of intelligence services on social media, employing netnography as a methodological framework. The study focuses on the online presence of the Romanian Foreign Intelligence Service (SIE) and the Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI) across three key platforms: Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. By analyzing the content and frequency, the research identifies the strategies used to communicate with the public, enhance transparency, and promote institutional goals. The findings highlight the role of social media in fostering public trust, engaging diverse audiences, recruitment and addressing challenges such as

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misinformation. This study contributes to understanding how intelligence services adapt to digital communication trends while navigating the delicate balance between operational secrecy and public outreach.

Keywords: social media platforms, intelligence services, digital communication, Romanian Intelligence Service, Foreign Romanian Intelligence Service

The main objective of the intelligence services is to protect national security and the fundamental values promoted by the state and society. They act in accordance with the interests of the state and ensure that the rights and freedoms of citizens are respected, using specific methods.

The objectives of intelligence services vary according to the geopolitical context, domestic legislation and national priorities of each state. Traditionally, intelligence services are responsible for safeguarding national and international security, preventing and combating espionage activities and providing relevant information to decision-makers to support their decision-making. Intelligence services around the world have as their primary objective the protection of citizens, while maintaining a balance between security and respect for fundamental rights¹. As part of the institutional architecture of every state, intelligence services are accountable to citizens and must maintain a balance between the transparency necessary for any institution working in a democratic system and the operational discretion - so necessary for institutions of this nature.

Transparency and accountability of intelligence services are components that build public trust. These elements ensure that intelligence services operate within a legal framework, serving the interests of states without becoming oppressive or politically controlled instruments. The transparency of intelligence services in democratic systems is limited by the nature of the activities that these institutions carry out, activities that involve considerable sensitivity and classified information. However, democratic systems have created ways to maintain openness. Transparent intelligence services publish annual reports in which they provide information about their activities, objectives and results achieved, without compromising operations while at the same time presenting the institution's strategic priorities. The second essential component in

¹ Martin Alessandro, Bruno Cardinale Lagomarsino, Carlos Scartascini, Jorge Streb, Jerónimo Torrealday, „Transparency and Trust in Government. Evidence from a Survey Experiment”, *World Development*, Volume 138, February 2022.

building transparency is communication with the public. Communicating with citizens involves on the one hand, informing citizens about major threats, security risks or preventive measures and on the other hand, organizing awareness campaigns.

Intelligence services communicate with citizens through a variety of channels and mechanisms, tailored to the information needs of the public and national security requirements. The aim of this communication process is to provide transparency, prevent risks and cultivate public trust, while maintaining the confidentiality specific to intelligence activities. In terms of the forms of communication, the communication services choose to address the public through: (a) official communiqués or press conferences, (b) build and maintain their official websites and online platforms, (c) collaborate with the media to convey information but also to clarify certain situations² and last but not least, (d) develop social media pages where they post relevant information, security alerts or prevention messages³.

The evolution of technology and the emergence of social networks have significantly contributed to the development of communication channels in society. Social media is an open space without too many strict barriers that provides a perfect place for developing channels of communication with the public. The presence of information services on social media can bring multiple benefits, both for the institutions and for citizens. The specialized literature does not discuss the role of social media in the work of intelligence services in much detail. However, numerous studies look at how social media has altered the way other types of government institutions reap the benefits of the social media space^{4 5}. Extrapolating, we can say that intelligence services use social media for:

- a. *Effective communication with the public.* This is due to the fact that social media is a space that allows for the rapid dissemination of relevant information, such as security warnings, awareness campaigns or crisis updates.

² Cristian E. Guerrero-Castro, "Strategic Communication for Security & National Defense: Proposal for an Interdisciplinary Approach", *Connections*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Spring 2013), pp. 27-52.

³ Chris Wells, *The Civic Organization and the Digital Citizen – communicating engagement in a networked age*, Oxford University Press, 2015.

⁴ Liam McLoughlin, Stephen Ward, and Daniel W.B. Lomas, "'Hello, World': GCHQ, Twitter and Social Media Engagement," *Intelligence and National Security*, vol.35, no. 2, 2020, pp. 233–251.

⁵ Marijn Janssen and Elsa Estevez, "Lean Government and Platform-Based Governance-Doing More with Less," *Government Information Quarterly*, vol.30, no. 1, 2013, pp. S1–S8.

Moreover, through the messaging elements that most social platforms have, intelligence services can communicate directly with citizens. This communication becomes direct, sometimes instinctive, and the informal method can contribute constructively to increasing trust.

Social media can be used to encourage citizens to report suspicious activity through private messages or redirects to official communication platforms and in the case of emergencies, citizens can receive alerts and instructions directly on social platforms.

- b. *Demystifying the activity of the services.* Social media platforms can create a space in which the mystery surrounding the intelligence services can be explained or, depending on the objectives of the services, maintained. Posts made by institutions can explain, in outline or in more detail, the role and mission of the intelligence service, helping to create a positive and accessible image. Through social media platforms, intelligence services can construct various discourses that make citizens more aware of the nature of the activities carried out by these institutions. Beyond discourses and historical elements, on social media platforms, intelligence services can present the success of certain missions and the contribution those missions make to national security.
- c. *Recruitment.* Given that the target audience for recruitment campaigns is most likely to be online, in recent times, intelligence agencies have realized that social media is an ideal venue to highlight employment opportunities and the benefits of security work can attract young and talented candidates.
- d. *Education and public awareness.* Through educational or awareness campaigns, intelligence services can help citizens to identify various risks such as cyber fraud, radicalization or espionage thus contributing to the development of a security culture⁶.
- e. *Image of the institution.* Social media is a mouthpiece through which you can not only explain to users the institution's activities or run educational campaigns but also build a brand, an image of a modern institution adapted to the dynamic society in which it exists. Active presence, well thought out, attractive content can modernize their image.

⁶ Michael Landon-Murray, „ Social Media and U.S. Intelligence Agencies”, *Journal of Strategic Security*, no. 3 Suppl. (2015): pp. 67-79.

Beyond these aspects, we can mention that intelligence services will also use social media as part of their processes and activities. Social media has become an information-rich source that intelligence services have been exploiting for some time. This process of gathering information from social media is called social media intelligence (SOCMINT)⁷. Without going into too much detail, Social Media Intelligence proves to be particularly useful for identifying individuals, tracking behaviors (such as radicalization) or observing public perceptions of certain events.

The presence of intelligence services on social media is a relatively recent phenomenon. This is the effect of the extraordinary evolution that technology has undergone in recent times, which has generated the development of digital platforms. Specialists attribute this development to the concept of *user generated content*, which assumes that the user is no longer just a consumer of information but also a producer of it.

Because social media platforms developed on the North American continent, the first intelligence services to choose to have a presence on social media platforms were American. During the Obama administration, federal agencies in the United States emphasized social engagement and openness to public relations. They made their appearance on social networks, the most popular being Facebook and Twitter. In 2014, the Central Intelligence Agency launches the first tweet on the official Twitter account of the intelligence establishment. Their message is in a typical of the secrecy register that pervades the work of these types of institutions: "We can neither confirm nor deny that this is our first tweet." Then the Federal Bureau of Investigation follows the same path and launches its presence on social media. During this period, the services' main concern was to improve their public image by communicating their mission⁸.

Over time, observing how social media platforms are changing the communication channels and becoming aware of the role these platforms play in the everyday life of the citizen, more and more intelligence services have chosen to *meet people where they are*⁹ and therefore to become active on

⁷ Sir David Omand, Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, "A Balance Between Security and Privacy Online Must Be Struck...", *Demos Report*, <<https://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/intelligence-Report.pdf>>, 2012.

⁸ Michael Landon-Murray, *op.cit.*

⁹ Liam McLoughlin, Stephen Ward, and Daniel W.B. Lomas, "'Hello, World': GCHQ, Twitter and Social Media Engagement," *Intelligence and National Security*, vol.35, no. 2, 2020, pp. 233–251.

social media platforms, mainly Twitter and Facebook. The content of information services has been diversified. They have gone from discussing their purpose and mission to organizing recruitment campaigns to attract candidates or activities to combat online misinformation or even campaigns to disseminate information about public safety (especially after the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015).

Lately, intelligence services have also been consolidating their presence on new platforms in response to their popularity with the public. Facebook users have migrated to Instagram which is why intelligence services have developed a presence there too. Taking advantage of the development of a space for professionals, LinkedIn, intelligence services have chosen to develop their recruitment campaigns on this platform as well.

A study looking at the presence of European Union intelligence services on social media platforms shows that in the case of the European intelligence services, out of the 69 analyzed structures, 20 own and maintain a Facebook page. Most of the time, domestic and foreign intelligence services are present on Facebook. Military intelligence institutions do not develop or administrate Facebook pages. Some European countries are very active on Facebook like: Germany, Romania or Estonia. In the case of these states, the internal and external information services are active and interact with Facebook users. A brief analysis of the information posted by them shows that, most of the time, the content disseminated is related to security challenges, awareness or recruitment. Regarding Twitter, the same research states that only 10 intelligence services „tweet” about their activity. The country with the most Twitter accounts is Germany. The information services are also present on Twitter in other countries such as Czech Republic, Italy, Netherlands, Romania, Spain, Estonia and Finland. At the European Union level, only 10 intelligence agencies have an Instagram account. Instagram is used by intelligence services in Germany, Greece, Italy, Romania, Slovakia and Spain while only in eight states the information services have a LinkedIn page. These countries are: France, Germany, Romania and Finland¹⁰.

Social media platforms and intelligence presence will continue to evolve in the future. We can anticipate that current and future trends are likely to see the integration of artificial intelligence elements to streamline the dialog process or to help develop content that will reach a larger number of users.

¹⁰ Raluca Lutai, „European intelligence services “just signed up” on social media. An analysis of secret services and social media platforms” în *Studia Europea*, 2/2022, pp. 213-215.

The possibilities to integrate video, audio or what is called visual storytelling will contribute to the development of the messages and the content conveyed. Messages, content and direct communication will remain on the already popular platforms but will certainly migrate to the new platforms that are becoming more and more popular. We are referring here, of course, to TikTok the place where the younger citizens of societies are present.

Method

This paper will follow two representative cases: the social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn) of the Romanian Intelligence Service and the Foreign Intelligence Service. Beyond the easy linguistic framework, the two intelligence institutions have been selected because they represent the largest and most representative intelligence institutions. They have a constant presence on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. The time period analyzed is January - December 2024. The method by which we aim to collect the information is netnography. Netnography is a virtual form of survey. This form of data collection started to be used since the mid-1990s initially for the field of marketing and business research, and later it was introduced to other disciplines as well¹¹. Netnographers analyze data about people's social behavior online. Netnographic analysis can provide insights into the practices, culture and commonalities of online consumers¹². In terms of analyzing the data collected, we will try to identify the directions in which the two intelligence services use social media platforms.

Analysis

The *Romanian Intelligence Service* (SRI) is the main intelligence agency in Romania, responsible for ensuring national security. Its main activities concern the defense of constitutional values, the prevention and combating of organized crime and terrorism, counter-espionage activities, cyber security and economic protection¹³. Currently, SRI is present online on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter.

The Romanian Intelligence Service had an active presence on social networks throughout 2024. Whether we are talking about Facebook, Instagram or LinkedIn the communication team of SRI sent monthly messages to the users of these networks.

¹¹ Ce este netnografia? Ce este netnografia | Navigating Social Worlds.

¹² Robert Kozinets, „Netnography 2.0”, 21 decembrie 2006, pp. 6–8.

¹³ Misiunea și viziunea SRI - Serviciul Român de Informații.

In the context of the electoral process that took place in Romania, and which was marked by several discussions about the involvement of foreign powers, the Romanian Information Service posted warning messages about fake accounts and attempts to manipulate public opinion: "Identify the signs of a fake account! Online misinformation can influence important decisions. Together, we can prevent manipulation." or "Pay attention to the source of election information! Misinformation is a powerful weapon, but so is accurate information."

For the sake of transparency and accountability, SRI showcases its community engagement and public events on its platforms. For example, various educational projects are presented (Launch of a program dedicated to preventing radicalization and violent extremism in schools. "Education is the first step to a safe society.") or participation in technology exhibitions with demonstrations of counterterrorist equipment, robots and artificial intelligence solutions.

Another consistent component of the messages that the SRI transmits to the public through social networks is the special messages dedicated to certain events. Over time these types of messages have proven to be very popular with the public. SRI manages every time to surprise through intelligent messages, adapted to the institution's activities, and full of humor. An example in this sense can be the post dedicated to Dragobete days in which using a famous Romanian expression - the eyes that are not seen are forgotten - the Service emphasizes the vigilance with which the institution follows carefully every activity built a secure Security environment. In the play on words, the verb „se uita” changes its meaning from "to look" "to survey". In the post dedicated to March 1, the coming of spring is greeted with a reference to the daily activity of the service and an exhortation to check information in multiple sources "The little apple symbolizes rebirth. Likewise, well verified information also revives truth. In our work, information from multiple sources is essential. Use it wisely!". On the occasion of March 8 the ladies are praised as being much better at carrying out stakeouts "Happy birthday to our colleagues! They redefine excellence in discretion. With perseverance and professionalism, they make every day a successful mission. Respect to all the women who choose to protect Romania from the shadows". On April 1, the content posted by the institution emphasizes information and disinformation and the SRI's mission to protect the truth "regardless of the date on the calendar".

Moreover, we could appreciate that the SRI builds a perception of a very closed national system of public order and security. The institution sends birthday messages to divers, the Navy, the Special Protection Service, colleagues in the Gendarmerie or the Romanian Police. The institution's day, Romania's national day, the date of NATO accession and other similar moments are also celebrated.

In addition to information campaigns and celebrations of relevant events, the Facebook page also includes real recruitment campaigns. The recruiting messages emphasized the discretion and dedication required of an intelligence officer: you won't be in the spotlight, but you will be a pillar of national security." Attracting new recruits is an obvious need also emphasized on Children's Day when they are offered a career in the secret service: "What do you want to be when you grow up? We have an answer for the brave: protector of the country. We're waiting for you at our events dedicated to the little ones, where curiosity becomes superpower." Other recruitment activities include participation in job fairs, such as those organized by universities, where analyst and operative officer positions were promoted as well as the launch of the dedicated "Careers in SRI" page which contains testimonials of employees and descriptions of specific challenges as well as a form that can be directly accessed by those who wish to apply for a job.

Through its work on the Facebook platform during 2024, SRI was able to stay close to citizens by communicating relevant, educational and engaging messages. The public had the opportunity to discover a human and engaging side of an institution often perceived as inaccessible.

Instagram and LinkedIn

The official account of the Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI) on Instagram has been a focal point of the institution's communication, managing to attract 34.5k followers through visually captivating, informative and visually engaging content tailored to the young audience. With more than 180 posts, SRI has shown that it can combine specific discretion with modern visual language.

The topics covered are not different from those we have identified on the Facebook platform - with minor exceptions that are not notable. In other words, the posts made on the Facebook account are taken to Instagram where they are adapted with the hashtags specific to this platform.

SRI's Instagram account in 2024 demonstrated how a public institution can become accessible and modern while maintaining its specific discretion. Through a combination of information, education and visual interaction, it strengthened the connection with young audiences and those interested in national security.

In terms of the cyberspace provided by LinkedIn, in 2024, the Romanian Intelligence Service exploded to attract talented professionals and communicate directly with an audience interested in national security careers. With over 14,000 followers, the account has positioned itself as an information hub for recruitment, events and professional development. Interesting and at the same time clever is the cover image of the page which continues an engaging and targeted message: "Curious? Very good. Discreet? Even better.", basically, two of the necessary elements for an employee of such an institution.

The content promoted by the institution on the LinkedIn page focuses on the area of recruitment campaigns and, as with the Instagram platform, the content is not very different from what we see on Facebook. The core elements of the service's activity are discussed. The posts highlight the multiple roles in the SRI: analysts, cybersecurity experts, linguists, sociologists, etc. "At the SRI, every profession counts. Whatever your professional background, you can contribute to national security. Apply now!" These posts are sometimes complemented by testimonials from employers who emphasize the challenges and rewards of a career in SRI: "My work is not visible, but its impact is real. At the end of the day, I know that I have done my best for Romania - Maria, operational analyst"

The recruitment campaign is complemented by postings of the job and internship fairs at which the institution presents itself and the programs for the personal and professional development of young people that the institution runs: "SRI invests in education. Through seminars, courses and direct interaction with our specialists, we are building the next generation of experts. Thanks to all the students who visited us at this year's events!". This type of content demonstrates that the institution's communication strategy is audience-oriented, an audience that needs to see the openness of the institution and that can always choose to join.

In our opinion, SRI's LinkedIn account is an example of effective use of the platform for recruiting, educating and building a strong institutional brand tailored to professionals and young aspiring professionals.

The *Foreign Intelligence Service (SIE)* uses its official Facebook page SIE Human Resources, LinkedIn and Instagram to communicate directly with the public and attract talented candidates. With an accessible tone and diverse content, the Human Resources department page has become a central point for information and recruitment. We chose to discuss the analysis of the three platforms in a condensed way because we noticed that there was no variance in content depending on the platform. In other words, messages that are posted on Facebook are also posted on Instagram and LinkedIn.

During 2024, the SIE carried out explicit recruitments for various roles: operational officer - "If you have courage, emotional intelligence and the desire to make a difference, the career of operational officer in the SIE is for you. Apply now for a unique role in the service of Romania. #RecrutareSIE" and non-commissioned officer. The page contains informative articles such as "5 steps to prepare for a career in foreign intelligence." but also testimonials from those who work there "Working in SIE means contributing, discreetly, to everyone's safety. Every day brings a challenge, and in the end, the satisfaction is immense. - Andrei, operational officer."

The storytelling is humorous sometimes, with users being invited to apply for linguist jobs - for some less familiar languages, through various posts in those languages. Of course, the figure of the super-secret agent James Bond is not missing either - "Do you want to be the next James Bond? Have you ever dreamed of being James Bond? Maybe we won't have spectacular gadgets, but we will certainly have equally important missions. We are waiting for you in our team! #RecrutareSIE"

The posts about open positions are complemented by the activity that the service carries out to get closer to future employees. Thus, the events that SIE organizes within several university centers in Romania are announced, in which they present the activity and career prospects in this institution. For high school students, SIE addresses them in a similar way with presentations developed within high schools: "A secure future starts with a solid education. Apply now for our post-secondary military education programs and discover a career in the service of Romania. #MilitaryEducation".

SIE understood the need to talk more and more often with the general public and participates in recruitment and career events. The institution's page announces and presents its presence at Career Days, an event organized by the University of Bucharest, or other career fairs such as Top Employers. The institution posted an image from the SIE stand:

“National security needs top people. We are waiting for you at Top Employer 2024 to discuss your future in our team. #ExternalSecurity #TopEmployer”.

In addition to the recruitment and career-related content, messages from festive moments such as December 1 – national day or the feast of Saint Nicholas are also added.

SIE’s presence on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn platforms in 2024 was an example of strategic communication, combining professionalism with a friendly touch and meaningful interactions. Its messages inspired trust, attracted candidates and educated the public about the institution’s mission.

Conclusions

The year 2024 represented a period of consolidation of the presence of Romanian intelligence services in the digital environment, marking a significant adaptation to contemporary communication trends through social media platforms. The two most important intelligence services in Romania, the Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI) and the Foreign Intelligence Service (SIE), showed, through their online presence, that their activity can be both transparent and close to the public that they continue to serve with the same discretion and professionalism. Both institutions used platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn to address multiple communication directions: recruitment, education, public information, but also to strengthen the institutional image. The campaigns carried out combined creativity with professionalism, demonstrating that these services are capable of using social media as an effective channel for dialogue with citizens. Facebook proved to be a central platform for broad communication, including recruitment campaigns, festive messages and awareness events. Instagram, with its focus on visual content, brought added accessibility, attracting a younger audience. Recruitment and festive messages were presented with a creative and modern tone, reinforcing the perception of a 21st century SRI and SIE. LinkedIn, on the other hand, was used mainly to attract talented professionals, providing details about available roles and employee testimonials. The page managed to create an image of trust and highlight the diversity of professions within the services.

The use of social media by SRI and SIE reflects a strategic approach, designed to demystify their work, attract new talent and educate the public

on the importance of national security. In a global context marked by disinformation and cybersecurity risks, these initiatives demonstrate a commitment to transparency and dialogue, while maintaining the necessary discretion.

The online activity of these institutions in 2024 represents an example of good practice for adapting traditional structures to contemporary realities, in which digital communication is essential to meet public expectations and ensure long-term relevance.

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