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Connecting the Dots and the Christmas Plot: A Response

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It didn't take long after 9/11 for the conventional wisdom to crystallize. The devastating terrorist attacks were almost immediately, and almost universally, chalked up to the intelligence community's failure to share information. Yet if al Qaeda's attempt to down Northwest flight 253 is any indication, the feds still haven't learned how to connect the dots.

The Christmas plot is shaping up to be an information-sharing epic fail. As early as last fall our spies began picking up alarming signals that something big was afoot. The clues should have been circulating widely throughout the intelligence community. And the system, according to former FBI counterterrorism official Ali Soufan, "should have been lighting up like a Christmas tree."

They weren't, and it wasn't.

Why not?

Part of the problem is that intelligence officials have powerful incentives to hoard data from one another. As I argue in a forthcoming law review [article](#), information sharing threatens to undermine two of the things agencies value the most—influence and turf.

Intelligence officials want to maximize their sway over the President and his advisors. In particular, they want the White House to rely on their judgment more than it relies on their rivals'. And agencies know that handing over data to bureaucratic competitors can cause their influence to shrink.

If the FBI gives CIA a piece of information that turns out to be the silver bullet, CIA will get the credit for the resulting intelligence breakthrough. From the Bureau's perspective, that's a pretty raw deal. Influence is a zero sum game; if the President is listening to CIA more, he's listening to the FBI less.

Intelligence officials also want to protect their turf, and sharing makes it harder for them to run their operations as they see fit. If the FBI tells CIA what it's up to, there's a chance the Agency might muscle in and take control.

These fears may have been at work in the aftermath of the Christmas plot. The FBI apparently decided to seek criminal charges against Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab without first consulting the Director of National Intelligence, Homeland Security, or the National Counter Terrorism Center. One reason they may have been kept in the dark is because the Bureau feared losing control over the investigation—i.e., turf.

So what can be done? If policymakers want to improve data exchange, they need to weaken intelligence agencies' existing incentives to hoard and create new incentives to share.

One way to encourage good behavior would be to reward officials who routinely share information. Exemplary employees could be promoted, handed choice assignments, and given cash rewards. By contrast, those who continue to hoard could be reassigned to dead-end jobs, demoted, or even fired.

Another possibility would be to adopt new performance metrics. Like professors who are up for tenure, intelligence officials could be evaluated partly on the extent to which others cite their reports. Other analysts can't rely on your work if they don't know it exists, so tying career prospects to citation count would create strong pro-sharing incentives.

Finally, reformers should consider ways to restructure the incentives at the agency-wide level. One option would be to establish a compensation scheme that allows sharing agencies to recoup at least a portion of the benefits that accrue to recipients. If agencies can internalize some of these positive externalities, data exchange would no longer hurt their bottom lines.

Solid intelligence represents our best chance to stop the next Abdulmutallab before he sets foot on a plane. And widespread information sharing is an essential building block of an effective intelligence system. Yet the intelligence community isn't going to start sharing simply because Congress and the President say please. It's not enough for our nation's lawmakers to tear down the wall; intelligence agencies need to be given reasons to climb over the rubble.

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