Op-Ed
Information at State Department -- Fort Knowx?
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Information—creating it, unearthing it, mining it, analyzing it, sharing it, disseminating it—is the main business of the U.S. State Department. Like gold, information is treasured and treated as a highly valued asset. Providing the appropriate structure for the use of information is of utmost concern to the Department.

Sixteen thousand five hundred cubic feet of granite, 4,200 cubic yards of concrete, 750 tons of reinforcing steel and 670 tons of structural steel protect the gold reserves of the United States deposited in Fort Knox. The policy of permitting no visitors was adopted when the Depository was established in the 1930s. This policy has never changed.

Unlike gold, information must be shared to gain, or at least retain, value. Combined with expert knowledge, information is the necessary ingredient in State's business. As the threat of terrorism remains ever-present, economies are in flux, and world crises arise, working without the best available information can mean the difference between life and death. But how this information is protected, stored and accessed is the focus of many discussions, policies, and business practices. The State Messaging Archive and Retrieval Toolset (SMART), Cable Archive Retrieval System (CARS), SIPRNet web publishing, and webgrams are just a few of many initiatives that are tackling these complex issues.

The Department controls access to information through its existing distribution channels, such as the TAGS system for telegrams and captions for sensitive data like medical records. The need-to-know policies are often determined by office, by overlapping authorities' interpretation of jurisdiction, and by what the established manual and automated systems permit. The result is that diplomatic reporting and policy discussions frequently remain inaccessible to employees who may need to see them.

Seeing a need to clarify the existing need-to-know guidelines, the SMART Steering Committee recommended to the Secretary of State to approve a policy that broadens the availability of information to security-cleared foreign affairs professionals, so that they will be able to see most formal messages.

Modeling the enlightened approach on Intelink, the managed intelligence community website established by DOD and CIA, SMART encouraged adopting a strategy of improved controls in order to improve availability of information. Such controls include:

- Monitoring use patterns

- Maintaining and expanding caption restrictions

- Basing access to captioned traffic on centrally approved security and individual user profiles

- Extending sensitivity markup to unclassified information as required by law (e.g., Privacy Act)

- Establishing a framework for user training, supervisory approval of user profiles and monitoring for potential abuse.

On October 22, 2003, the Secretary of State approved an access concept that follows the Intelink risk management model that adheres to the above controls and makes classified and unclassified information broadly available to foreign affairs professionals with valid security clearances who have signed an approved non-disclosure agreement.

It may be too early to tell what the impact of this new policy will be. But it is not too early to build awareness about it, and to think about how it will be implemented and how to measure success. Certainly, the Department will be richer for the effort, and the home of Fort Knowx, where information and knowledge are shared, not locked away.

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To see the Action Memorandum and background on the new Need to Know policy, please link to
http://smart.state.gov/index.cfm?fuseaction=file.DownloadForm&WEBSITE_OBJECT_ID=253F2E2B-0971-11D7-A941-000802250756&CFID=37295&CFTOKEN=96279225