

The truth is out there

The world's first civil society intelligence agency, **Open Briefing** is a social enterprise that aims to keep those striving to make the world a better place safe and informed.

Words by *Fiona McGowan*.

Say 'global intelligence', and you conjure up an image of *Men in Black*-style agents, whispering into their wrists on street corners in far-flung parts of the world. Or perhaps a suave Bondesque character, gathering information from unsuspecting international villains. Or maybe a huge facility full of computer screens and dozens of boffins poring over encrypted messages from international terrorist cells...

Chris Abbott's Open Briefing intelligence organisation is none of these, and as its founder and executive director, he epitomises none of the 'spy' clichés. Sure, he has an adventurous history – from leading an expedition into the Amazon at the tender age of 21, to running a survival training company with a former Royal Marine. And sure, he has worked with others to put influential politicians and military heads together with their arch enemies to try to resolve their problems. And he knows more about the covert activities of the UK special forces in places like Iraq and Syria than your average citizen. But his business is nothing to do with covert government fact-finding, and he is nothing like a spy. Living with his wife and young son on a smallholding near the remote Prussia Cove in Cornwall, Chris works exclusively for not-for-profit organisations and the general public. The intelligence he gathers from consultants around the world comes from 'open sources' – which means the information is not classified and is in the public domain.

Chris is an understated individual, humble about his background – but he has achieved a lot and has an impressive influence in his field. Having an MLit in Social Anthropology forms the bedrock of his

motivational drivers today. Even before his Master's, he had led an expedition deep into the Ecuadorian rainforest to connect with a tribe that hoped to branch out into eco-tourism. He raised funds, managed a Channel 4 film crew, negotiated an Ecuadorian bureaucratic minefield, dealt with a life-threatening attack by an aggressive tribe, and generally honed his skills for the career that he has now espoused.

Some years later, Chris took a job as a lowly intern at the Oxford Research Group (ORG) – a civil society organisation set up during the Cold War, dedicated to resolving conflict between nations and ideologies. It is very much focused on the long-game. "It's called Track II Diplomacy," explains Chris. "There's a non-official, back-door communication going on between adversaries. You're just building relationships, building trust. There's a lot of dialogue; bringing together different groups of people from military and government senior personnel." But it is not a speedy process. "It takes decades, sometimes, for any progress to be made."

Chris rose rapidly through the ranks at ORG, going from researcher to deputy director in six years. One of the lasting legacies of his time there was the implementation of a 'Sustainable Security' programme. "We focused on 'integrated threats', so we didn't just deal with things in silos, but as part of a puzzle," he explains. "We looked at climate change, socio-economic divisions, militarisation and resource competition..." Essentially, working out how to prevent an escalation of the basic problems of our world – in joined-up thinking. How refreshing.

Seven years after leaving ORG – "I could have stayed and maybe eventually run the organisation, but I wanted



Chris Abbott pictured at his smallholding in Cornwall

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to do something different” – Chris has two books, dozens of research papers and a lot of diverse experiences under his belt. Setting up his own consultancy was a no-brainer. Today, around 20 people work for Open Briefing – a mix of volunteers and paid consultants with a background in intelligence, military, law enforcement and government. On top of that are the researchers who tirelessly trawl through YouTube footage, personal contacts, published information or social media to get the on-the-ground knowledge for Open Briefing's reports.

One of the main drivers for Open Briefing is to provide non-governmental organisations (NGO) with vital information before they send staff and volunteers into potentially dangerous situations. Chris also offers tailor-made training programmes for NGO staff. “Our emphasis is on the preventative stuff,” he says. “Doing proper risk assessments and proper training, so they don't become a casualty or a kidnapping victim in the first place.” Once a client has completed the training, Open Briefing can also source and supply the equipment and training they will need ‘in the field’ – from the Karrimor SF rucksacks to the GPS units and the survival training. With a very diverse range of clients, Open Briefing has been commissioned to provide a fascinating array of reports: from corruption in the supply chain of pharmaceuticals from the West to the developing world, to identifying the helicopters used to drop barrel bombs on civilian areas in Syria.

Open Briefing is also dedicated to providing a public intelligence service: “Keeping the public informed about certain issues that are not in the public eye, or that the media hasn't quite got a grasp of, because of a political agenda.” The reports and articles on the website connect the dots of migration, the impact of environmental crises, and the conflicts around the world. “We're currently tracking the use of ground troops in Iraq and Syria,” says Chris. “Although the government claims that there are no combat troops in the region, we know for a fact that special forces are operating there. It's ground troops via stealth, if you like, without public or parliamentary oversight.” Then there's the steady rise of ‘remote-control warfare’. Drones, Chris says, are just the tip of the iceberg. “Remote-control warfare is all about fighting wars at a distance: using drones, special forces, private military companies, cyber war, mass surveillance.”

It seems that today's technology has caught up with



A Royal Air Force Reaper RPAS (Remotely Piloted Air System) at Kandahar Airfield in Afghanistan



A soldier watches as a Tarantula Hawk (T-Hawk) Micro Remote Piloted Air System (RPAS) hovers over the desert in Afghanistan



Open Briefing looked at climate change

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science fiction. “Now, going beyond drone warfare,” Chris warns, “we're looking at the rise of ‘lethal autonomous weapon systems’ – killer robots.” And there's the recent calls from the US military for drones that will literally vanish after dropping their payloads. Or *Robocop*-style lightweight exoskeletons that can be worn by soldiers to make them stronger and faster. There is a genuine social purpose behind putting this information in the public domain. Just as there are controls with the use of biological and nuclear warheads, says Chris, there need to be controls on the autonomous, remote-controlled killing machines of the future. “There's a lot of pressure from civil society to stop that from happening,” he adds.

As if the main strands of work – gathering intelligence, supporting NGOs and scrutinising governments – are not enough, Chris believes that Open Briefing can expand further. “I want to bring in people who have different experiences and backgrounds to offer security services and the very best equipment and training to aid workers, journalists, activists and others striving to make the world a better place.” While the information that he considers can be nothing short of terrifying, he maintains a positive outlook on the world. “By the nature of the job, I tend to deal with the negative and the death and destruction of the world. But we're constantly trying to make it better. I'm firmly convinced that if civil society organisations weren't there, things would be a lot worse. We make things better and we just keep chugging away.” It is perhaps being in Cornwall that helps with this upbeat attitude: he loves the independence of spirit and energy that he feels all around him. Life on a smallholding – with its chickens and wood-chopping and physical labour – is a hands-on existence that provides a welcome contrast to the complexities of the global crises that face him the moment he switches on his computer. ■

For more information, go to openbriefing.org. Open Briefing is a not-for-profit social enterprise supported by volunteers and funded by charitable grants and public donations. It is currently seeking major donations and corporate sponsorship to help fund the provision of new intelligence, security, training and equipment services to aid agencies, disaster relief organisations and other charities.

Chris is the author of *21 Speeches that Shaped Our World* and *Beyond Terror: The Truth About the Real Threats to Our World*, both published by Random House.