

C O N F I D E N T I A L

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C O I N S

When the Information Handling Committee, USIB, was established in April 1968, the largest and most noticeable project it inherited from CODIB was the Community On-line Intelligence System (COINS).

COINS was the result of the recommendation (among others) made by the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board in 1965 that the intelligence community might improve its "backward" information handling techniques by extending to the Washington intelligence community the TIPS on-line system then being developed at NSA. (Recommendation 2, PFIAB memorandum of 15 June 1965, as Attachment A to Ex. Director Memo of 18 May 1966.) For security reasons NSA rejected having any TIPS terminals outside their Ft. Meade Headquarters. The idea of the COINS system was modified by degrees in 1965-66 into a network of computers at CIA, NSA, DIA, and NPIC (with State as a terminal on the DIA system) joined by a store-and-forward switch with each agency making available to the others some of its own data files. During the period when the utility of such a system was being tested (COINS I), the store and forward switch would be at DIA. However, during COINS II, the system's operational period,

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the system switch would be permanently fixed at CIA (CODIB, COINS Implementation Plan, 25 May 1966, Secret.) CIA had agreed on COINS II in 1966 (Planning Memorandum from the Executive Director-Comptroller to the Deputy Directors, 18 May 1966, SECRET). By 1968 the idea of COINS II had faded, however, and in the 70's[↑] term, COINS II, came to mean something quite different. (NSA, COINS 146, COINS Master Plan, 2 December 68, Secret.)

During the 1965-68 period COINS had been a CODIB project, with the COINS Committee a subcommittee of CODIB. There had been considerable slippage in the program, difficulties in gluing the disparate hardware together, and some friction among the various people associated with the experiment. Consequently, there were discussions on the management of COINS about the time that the formation of the IHC was being considered. The resulting change came out as a memorandum for Director of NSA from the DCI (undated, but issued about 31 May 1968) appointing NSA as the Executive Agent for COINS, a Project Manager, and subsystem managers. It left the IHC with only two responsibilities concerning COINS:

1. "The Chairman, IHC, will provide your (Dir. NSA's) project manager guidance on the substantive intelligence requirements of the system, including a list of primary files to be included in the system for the purpose of evaluation," and;

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2. "A COINS Evaluation Panel will be established by the IHC. This Panel will be working very closely with your project manager and it is requested that he be directed to give them every assistance in their evaluation work. Their principal effort will be during the period January to July 1969 with a report to the IHC as soon as practical thereafter."

The July 1969 date for the completion of the COINS Experiment evaluation seems ironic at the time of this writing two and a half years later. NSA has requested a delay in the evaluation period several times, until the date for such an evaluation is an uncertain period in the future. There were a number of reasons for delays. There were constant equipment changes as the agencies upgraded their systems; with resulting complications in interface, software, etc. There was a very lukewarm response by various agencies' analysts to a system that, through the lack of standards, was very difficult for a non-ADP person to query, and required the use of numerous look-ups. The COINS System Manager made many valiant efforts to develop users' groups in the agencies, but it was an uphill struggle to overcome analysts' inertia with the files and the type of system provided. (COINS Semiannual Review, 1 Jan-20 June 70, COINS/329-70, p. 25, Secret.) The basic COINS paradox was this: not enough analysts found enough to interest them in the COINS files to justify the effort in

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querying such a system, while the agencies did not want to spend the considerable amounts necessary to build machine files more interesting to the Analysts just for a community experiment. If there had been a larger number of machine files already available when the experiment began, or if the system technically had been easier for analysts to query successfully, this problem might have been circumvented. But they were not, and several years later it was still a frustrating system for the non-technical to query. (COINS Semi-annual Review, 1 Jan-30 June 71, COINS-277-71, p. 7-8, Secret.)

Even the two responsibilities left to IHC, files and evaluation, were not easy to carry. In its last year CODIB had set up a Panel on Files for use in COINS, under [redacted] then Deputy Director of Central Reference, CIA.

Twenty-one files, whose chief virtue was that they were already available in machine language, were offered to COINS, most of them by DIA. That Agency was preparing its own DIAOLS (DIA On-Line System), and since the COINS switch was at DIA, DIAOLS files could concurrently run on COINS. The Marengo Panel, however, felt that quality was more important than quantity, selected ten files they felt would make a good corpus for a test of the feasibility and utility of COINS, and left a reasonable criteria for selecting and approving future files. The ten files reflected a bias toward

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[redacted] in response to the PFIAB recommendation, and were chosen because they were of interest to analysts in more than one agency--but always within the limitation that they were already available in machine form. (Report of CODIB Panel on Files for Use in COINS, CODIB-D-113/4.9, 8 March 1968, Secret.)

However, though [redacted] recommendations were approved by CODIB as one of its last acts, and not disapproved by IHC, there was still a school of thought that everything available should be put on COINS to attract the widest possible use. Though not sanctioned by IHC, nearly thrity other available files did appear at one time or the other, with files divided into a compromise of "PRIMARY FILES" (the ten recommended by [redacted] which would be used in the evaluation of the system) and "SECONDARY FILES" (which would be used to attract users who had no interest in the PRIMARY FILES). (COINS 146, Master Plan, I, 3 Dec. 68, p. 16, Secret.) It was obvious to most people that the addition of the secondary files would undermine the Marengo Panel's purpose in selecting a quality test corpus, because it would be almost impossible to separate out "primary" queries from "secondary" queries when they were automatically logged at the switch. The clumsy separation of the files into primary and secondary (with two different procedures for adding and deleting the sets of files) disappeared over the years. In

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early 1972, with the system still unevaluated, only four of
the original ten [redacted] choices still remained on COINS--

[redacted]
to NSA's computer from their original agencies.

The Evaluation has been even more difficult to achieve. The original implementation plan (May 1966) had envisioned a technical evaluation--simply to see that it could be done--about six months after the system became operational, or some time in 1967, with an evaluation of the system's usefulness to the analyst, later and after more thought based on experience. This timetable could not be met, but there has been technical data on the performance of the system, based on manual logs at terminals and an automatic log, (p. 9, e.g., COINS Semiannual Review, 1 Jan-30 June 70, COINS 329-70, Secret) at the switch, ever since the system switch went operational. This information has been collected and evaluated by a COINS Test and Evaluation Panel, which has met since February 1968. The Panel drew up a Test Plan (IHC-D-113.4/11, 31 May 1968) which had a data gathering schedule ending 30 June 1969, with conclusions and decisions by September 1969. After NSA had requested and received delays in the evaluation timetable the whole question remained dormant for several years.

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However, the question of evaluation came to life again in late 1971. In the early days of the IHC, CIA had been anxious to get on with the evaluation of COINS, to see if its usefulness matched its costs. But at the Forty-Second IHC meeting (15 December 1971) the CIA member expressed some misgivings on the subject of evaluating COINS. He argued that there would be a successor system to COINS, and this system might be quite different from the present COINS. Putting money into contractor support, testing, etc., ^{might} ~~may~~ not be cost-effective. At the same meeting, the COINS Project Manager, in briefing the IHC on COINS progress, mentioned that the problem of testing the utility of COINS had been troublesome. The Project Management Office had never been in a position to do a utility evaluation of COINS, so they had contracted with Dr. Ed Adams of IBM Research Labs to look at the problem and develop utility indices, by which the system could later be measured.

Dr. Adams briefed the IHC on these indices at the Forty-Third meeting, 19 January 1972. In his introduction of Dr. Adams, the COINS Project Manager stated that he thought it was still too soon to evaluate COINS, but not too soon to develop evaluation techniques. He wished to know how hard it would be to collect the data. If it looked good and when the system had stabilized, they would have meaningful figures. But in the meantime he had no measure of system utility. The

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Chairman, IHC, felt at that time that Dr. Adams had not yet progressed far enough to address the larger question--convincing the budget people of the utility of the system. While COINS could be compared with a manual system in, for instance, a crisis situation, there still remained the question whether this was the correct system to choose.

Hovering behind the question of a COINS evaluation had always been a fear that has not been dissipated by any reports, programs, or future COINS plans. That fear is that the system may never be truly evaluated but will evolve into some follow-on system that must be accepted as an accomplished fact--without anyone ever truly knowing what the community's real requirements for a network are, nor if COINS is the best answer for these requirements.

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