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Spying on ourselves

CIA in the Information Age

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In the business world, organizations are becoming aware of the value in this "information age" of the body of information generated about their own operations. Banks, which had previously regarded their sole activities as lending and borrowing money, have been transformed into information brokers; information about money has become as valuable as money itself. Timely and constant feedback is essential to many service organizations, and it is at the root of the Japanese "just-in-time" approach to reducing inefficiency.

CIA is not in the business of selling information on the intelligence business; we will never be able to reap the profits that a bank might.

But CIA should be in the business of capturing information on how it functions for its own internal consumption. This would enable the Agency to do a better job of determining where the process of intelligence collection, analysis, and dissemination works, and where it does not.

Various factors have contributed to CIA's delay in developing the sort of "corporate intelligence" that is becoming essential in the competitive business world. Some have been technological, but many past technological obstacles no longer exist. Some are procedural, rooted in the peculiarities of our covert craft. There is no denying, however, that the profession has changed considerably in the last few years toward more internal communication and a necessity for cooperation and collaboration. The most persistent factors are found in the bureaucratic inertia of our organizational policies. But these also can be changed.

Some Suggestions

The following suggestions all stem from ways in which we might improve our performance by collecting, maintaining and applying corporate intelligence—by "spying" on ourselves:

- Overhaul the intelligence-collection cycle by improving analyst-collector communication to shorten the time delays and to capture better how we really value the information collected.

- Accumulate and retain information that identifies our experts and their expertise.

- Monitor our work in progress in order to know what we know at any given instant, and long before it is out the door as a finished product.

- Understand the market for our product by collecting and disseminating information on our consumers—the policymakers and their institutions—to those who need it.

Each of the proposals below prescribes increased reliance on computer information systems. Little of what is described, however, could not be implemented with existing resources. We often overinvest in the technologies, even as we have underinvested in a comprehensive plan for what we ought to do with them. Better use of information systems will only come from a coherent and corporate vision of what has to be done.

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Overhauling the Collection Cycle

The intelligence-collection cycle is too convoluted, too slow, and only really works well when its formal rules are bent. "Well, that is not what you do when you really need to get the information..." could be a part of our credo. And every one of my reports officer colleagues in the Directorate of Operations (DO) has his or her analyst to go to for *ad hoc* collection guidance. The self-fueling formal bureaucracy that governs collection guidance could be rebuilt by making greater use of passively collected information and tightening the analyst–collector loop.

We might try observing those who actually use the intelligence the collectors collect. The current SAFE, the flagship repository of the Directorate of Intelligence (DI), is like a big bin of intelligence reports—collectors put information in, analysts take information out, and SAFE is none the wiser for it.

In the business world, however, databases and information providers vend information and produce meta-information. The process of acquiring information itself generates information, except at CIA, where we require that consumers do that by periodically filling out vague and uninspiring questionnaires. But we should know whether the intelligence we collect at considerable expense is valuable.

Passive collection at CIA similar to that practiced by the commercial world's marketing departments would let collectors know more about their analytic consumers without distracting those consumers. Analysts leave many traces as to the value they place on the collection they consume, by including bibliographies with their drafts. In addition, every SAFE cable saved for later use, regardless of whether or not it ends up as part of a published product, might be noted.

Improve Feedback

We also should streamline the mechanisms for soliciting more active feedback. One way would be to shorten the path between collector and consumer by removing any unnecessary intermediaries and delays.

Our cable system and our communication policies are products of the pre-World War I era. Although improvements have been made in the former, much of our *modus operandi* remains outdated.

Advances in modern telecommunications may make it possible for an analyst to communicate almost instantaneously with the appropriate collector. In the meantime, we should take steps to break down the remaining technical barriers and to make an unregulated resource into a functional system. In cases where close and timely collaboration could make all the difference, direct communication might be specifically mandated. In other cases, however, Agency policy considerations may dictate that analyst–field communications should stop at the equivalent of the DO reports desk, with Headquarters reserving the right to gist, reject or pass on questions, tasking and information.

In many cases, communication ought to proceed freely, (b)(1)
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(b)(3)(n) develop rapport with Headquarters consumers, to requery a source, and to develop a feel for the substance of the collection.

In addition to using SAFE to note automatically analytic interest, it could be used to fill the role of a communications medium, putting analysts in touch with collectors in a smooth and seamless fashion. For example, an analyst, reading a cable on his or her screen, could type "reply," and fire back a source-directed requirement, a request for further information, or analytic comments on the quality of the report.

Such an automated system would not put such organizations as the Collection Requirements and Evaluations Staff (CRES) out of business. There would still be a managerial role to play in those cases where direct analyst–collector communication is infeasible or undesirable because of volume or sensitivity. CRES would have to represent Intelligence Community interests and serve as an intermediary between CIA internal communication channels and the less integrated, larger community.

Identifying the Experts

We are heading into times when it will be increasingly important to work across multiple disciplines, bringing experts together, and using our internal expertise more efficiently to compensate for a decreasing ability to hire outside experts. Therefore, we need to be able to identify our own experts.

Electronic mail conferencing, something the Agency has enjoyed in CONFER, is one major tool for identifying expertise. To some, the exchanges made possible in CONFER represent the best of communication, and, to others, the worst. CONFER enabled me to build rapidly a network of technical contacts vital to my analytic work, including experts in components outside of my directorate, whom I might never have been able to meet via any other means. CONFER's critics would argue that it has been little more than an electronic version of the old water cooler, a place to hang out, waste time, and spread rumors.

Far more has been lost, however, because CONFER has almost never been championed by managers as a way to integrate Agency communities. Moreover, for lack of a corporate-minded sponsor, it has suffered death by a thousand cuts as a result of resource constraints and managerial skepticism.

As for purely passive collection, we should pool all the information relevant to each of us from a professional standpoint. Now it resides in numerous and incompatible databases, or it has never made the leap from paper to electronic form. When I, as a DI analyst, publish a paper, I have demonstrated expertise on a particular subject—someone to consult the next time the subject arises. Merely listing an analyst's phone number on a piece of finished intelligence is not enough. We should make his or her production part of a corporate information base. Analysts' training records, relevant experience from personal history statements, formal course work and travel also should be accessible.

Every Agency employee's experiences are potentially applicable to some sort of problem. Most of the help I have received covering my analytic accounts has, in fact, come from non-analysts. Similarly, I have seen projects in the DO and in the Directorate of Science

& Technology that were starving for useful information I knew was in the heads of DI colleagues. In such cases, our information systems should play the part of "matchmaker."

Monitoring Work In Progress

Today, analysts act as filters, sifting through the news of the world for interesting items that stand out as anomalous, unexpected, or otherwise worthy of note. These items then enter the production process: the analyst starts drafting a current intelligence item, holds the information for possible use in a more comprehensive piece, or sends a copy up the management chain for discussion. But how long does it take for information to move up the hierarchy? How long does it take before the news spreads laterally? How often does someone see an item of interest only when the finished intelligence is on its way out the door in hardcopy form? How often was the product never seen by people to whom it would have made a difference, or who could have weighed in on the subject with a useful contribution?

We could automate the production "mill" down to its roots, turning the production process into a vast management information system. What if each analyst were able to plug his or her finds into a "corporate consciousness?" Cables, notes, concept papers and drafts could be sorted and prioritized by each analyst, using desktop information tools. And the analysts' personal models just would be a part of a branch's view of the world. The branch chief could manage the branch's collective issues, weighing in with new priorities and with the branch's own insights. This process would be repeated at each successive level of the hierarchy.

We could also substantially improve the lateral flow of information. Where information might have had to travel up a managerial chain and down again to reach other interested parties, or be passed via the "old analyst network" of former career trainee classmates and carpoolers, we could query each other's work in progress. Putting all finished intelligence drafts into the electronic web would make them instantly available to any manager or analyst with a need to know. When an analyst submits a concept paper to manage-

ment, we could put it into the system, and we could include an abstract, keywords, and author's interests.

Why shouldn't the Deputy Director for Intelligence, or one of his subordinates, down as far as need to know dictates, be able to, in the space of a few minutes, determine what it is we know, or plan to be able to say? This is far from difficult; we have the information in hand, and most times it is already in electronic form. As with the unstudied tomes for collection guidance, the yearly production plan is an anachronism from a time when it really did take a year to compile what it is we thought we ought to know about.

Better Marketing

The ultimate end of our work is to deliver timely and pertinent intelligence to policymakers, and a better understanding of the market for our product can only make it more valuable. The application of corporate intelligence to our marketing would aid in matching up issues with the proper experts and in keeping better track over time of our consumers, both individuals and organizations.

Helping issues reach experts is directly related to a better understanding of our internal expertise. We need to ensure that this expertise is sought even when all of the questions are not explicit. An automated solution should not be so foreign to us, as it parallels actions taken more than a decade ago to improve the flow of information to the analyst through SAFE. If intelligence reports can be cast out onto the waters, to be captured by analyst profiles, we should be able to do the same with the questions our consumers need to have answered.

SAFE itself could be used to disseminate consumer questions to the analytic community. When a question covers a variety of issues or accounts, it could be drafted in the form of a descriptive memorandum of consumer interest and put into SAFE. Once in SAFE, it would enter the stream of information flowing to analysts, to be caught by finely tuned analytic profiles. Each memorandum would include information

to put respondents in touch with a single Agency focal point, in order to maintain the control necessary to coordinate and avoid duplication of effort, and, through that focal point, with each other.

The mechanics of such a system would be simple. It would use the existing means for disseminating intelligence information to disseminate tasking information in a unification of currently separate but logically similar processes. We might accrue long-term benefits as well by capturing, in a single information base, the history of what we were asked, including questions we answered and the information that would let us map trends and refine our focus.

Retaining the questions we were asked raises the need to keep better track of our consumers by maintaining a useful corporate knowledge of our contacts. We produce countless reports on contacts with our consumers. My branch, division and office produce contributions to the weekly highlights; for all I know, the end result is a lifeless page in a volume destined for some dusty shelf. We also engage in a great many exchanges that never make it into any sort of corporate memory. All of this information could—and should—be captured as a corporate resource. Without a robust corporate memory, we skip along on anecdote and rumor. All too often, we go into meetings with consumers and counterparts from other agencies without a good feel for their positions, preconceptions, or expectations.

Dealing with issues is much the same as dealing with consumers. If an issue cuts across various regional and functional areas of expertise, we require collaboration. We have SAFE as a building block for disseminating issue information to a wider audience, and expanding SAFE to embrace questions as well as answers would make it a far better tool. But where is the corporate information base on our consumers? Ideally, an analyst should never produce finished intelligence without an understanding of all other relevant Agency statements on his or her issue, even if the piece refutes our past assessments. Why should we approach each consumer without a similar, corporate game plan?

Conclusions

In the more than 40 years since its creation, the CIA has had ample time to develop wrinkle after wrinkle in its organizational structure. Even the briefest of surveys can turn up numerous cases where ideas have been or are being reinvented, and where opportunities are missed for lack of information which is in the hands of others. There is an increasing urgency for coordination and collaboration and for sharing information, however, as the post-Cold War world becomes more complex.

We could collect an abundance of intelligence within the Agency on our own comings and goings to know better what it is that we know. Much, if not most, of the "hardware" is already in place. All that is needed is a corporate policy to integrate broadly across the Agency the collection of information on our work with the work itself.

Spying on ourselves would render CIA far more flexible. By better understanding our performance, we would be better prepared for the next crisis, and more streamlined and efficient in the long term. If we could quickly identify our experts and lay our hands on our current thinking on fast-breaking issues, we could instantly reconfigure ourselves to meet the needs of the day. In the multipolar world of the future we will have more and more occasion to draw together disparate groups of experts who have effective ties to their collectors and who have an intimate knowledge of their consumers.

This article is classified SECRET.