



i-intelligence

The Trouble with Best Practices

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Opening Questions



- What are current best practices in intelligence analysis?
- Can we learn lessons from other disciplines?
- What best practices from non-intelligence domains have utility?
- What best practices do not apply to intelligence?
- How do you evaluate analytic quality in intelligence?
- Are there unique aspects that prevent the use of best practices?

Opening Conjectures



- The limited use of analytic best practices cannot be explained by reference to insufficient time or training (although these are legitimate culprits)
- We should consider as well those issues that condition analysts against the use of best practices. These include the problems of:
 - Definition
 - Perception
 - Application
 - Knowing

In the Beginning...



Titian, *Adam and Eve*

The Problem of Definition



- Analysis as a *reductionist* process constitutes a fraction of what we do; the bulk of our efforts are oriented toward *holistic* methodologies
- Most techniques encourage the fragmentation of knowledge; this runs counter to our instinctive preference for building a narrative by reducing the amount of information we have to deal with
- Reductionist approaches only work if we share a common understanding of the constituent elements we are dealing with (or end up with)
- If we can't agree on these elements, we have a problem of *knowing*

The Problem of Perception



- Analysis is not a unitary activity; it consists of multiple cognitive processes, most of which are founded on *perception*
- Perception is our basic unit of knowledge; even ignorance is a product of perception (which supposes some knowledge)
- How we perceive a problem determines our willingness to use analytic best practices (i.e. if we *think* we “get” the problem, we wont analyse it properly)
- The more complex the problem, the likelier we are to use “tried and trusted” methods of analysis
- This has the effect of reducing operational uncertainty but foregoing analytical rigour

The Problem of Perception



- Best practices do not alleviate the perception of risk – analytical, organisational, operational or otherwise
- Analysts must still contend with:
 - The fallacy of misplaced concreteness
 - The curse of logical positivism
 - The problem of verificationism

The Problem of Application



- **Best practices do not make the business of intelligence any easier, which is why they are readily avoided**
 - Most techniques are intended to shape decisions (difficult, not the analyst's job) rather than answer questions (easy, anyone can do this)
 - They create more work, typically by exposing bias or ignorance. Our default biological setting is to avoid this outcome
 - They generate more information, which is the last thing we want; more information does not necessarily reduce analytic uncertainty
 - They are context specific; what works in one case may not in another
 - They are only as good as the people who use them

The Problem of Knowing



The Problem of Knowing



- The philosopher Fred Dretske offers the following problem:

“Unknown to Sarah, her neighbor, a person she sees every day, is a spy. When she sees him, therefore, she sees him without awareness of either the fact that he is a spy or the fact that she sees a spy.”

The Problem of Knowing



- The problem of definitions:
 - The Middle East
 - The Wider Middle East
 - The Arab World
 - The Arabian Gulf
 - West Asia
- Given the differences in meaning, how do we build analytical understanding?

The Problem of Knowing



- If we are to employ reductionist approaches to analysis, are we agreed on the elements that make up the whole?
- Do we agree on the properties, characteristics and behaviors of:
 - The sources we monitor?
 - The information we collect?
 - The issues we address?
 - The targets we develop?
- Best practices can help us surface our knowledge and test its validity or relevance. However, the problem of *knowing* typically remains unresolved



The Fix (?)

- **Definition**
 - Overhaul the vocabulary of analysis (easier said than done)
 - Beware the fixing of definitions (“X” is never “Y” for long)
- **Perception**
 - Educate the 19th century out of the analyst
 - Operate counterintuitively (i.e. do the opposite of what comes naturally)
 - Enhance perceptual discomfort

The Fix (?)



- **Application**
 - Shift perspectives: uncertainty is good; information overload is valuable
 - Work harder to work smarter
 - If all else fails, increase the analyst's stake in the decision (yes, but...)

- **Knowledge**
 - Borrow from philosophy (e.g. Aristotle's Ways of Knowing)
 - Borrow from the library sciences (e.g. thesauri, taxonomic and ontological systems, Ranganathan's facets)

In Praise of Best Practices



$$H(X) = \mathbb{E}_X[I(x)] = - \sum_{x \in \mathcal{X}} p(x) \log p(x).$$

Thank You



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