

The Collators Podcast

Episode 3 - Intelligence; good, bad and indifferent - What is it?

Overview

Mark and Howard wrestle with the deceptively simple question: What is intelligence? They explore why intelligence is so hard to define, how it differs from raw data and information, and why it sits somewhere between science and art. Along the way, they highlight the many uses (and misuses) of the word "intelligence," from law enforcement practice to political spin.

External Links or References:

CIA - definitions of intelligence

<https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/Wanted-Definition-of-Intel.pdf>

HUMINT - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_intelligence_\(intelligence_gathering\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_intelligence_(intelligence_gathering))

National Intelligence Model -

<https://library.college.police.uk/docs/npia/NIM-Code-of-Practice.pdf>

Paul Otlet (and the Mundaneum) <https://daily.jstor.org/internet-before-internet-paul-otlet/>

[ERROR NOTE: Paul was Belgian, not French. Apologies]

Sherman Kent and the Profession of Intelligence Analysis

<https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/Kent-Profession-Intel-Analysis.pdf>

SIGINT - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Signals_intelligence

Spycatcher by Peter Wright - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spycatcher>

Transcript

(Intro hook not transcribed)

Mark

Hello everyone, I'm Mark Lockwood. This week we're going to be talking about a question that Howard and I have been asked many times over many years and every time we're asked, we kind of shrink a little bit because it's one of these questions that we have, we know the answer but it's very hard to articulate. And so the question is, what is intelligence?

Howard

You could spend all of your life from birth to death trying to come up with a common understanding of what intelligence is. It's kind of what is the secret of life. And actually for me anyway, I think it's really important because if we think about how as human beings we need to communicate and share.

We do that through creating a lexicon, a common language and a common understanding so that when you give a certain signal, the person or people you're communicating to, understand what it is that you're saying it's not lost in translation if that makes sense. And nowhere is that more true than the use and 99.9% of the time, abuse or misuse of the term intelligence.

Because it means so many different things in so many contexts and communities and different to different people, before you talk about it, you need to understand what you're referring to jointly and actually just as importantly what you're not referring to. So that's a precursor to having a conversation.

The second thing is, Intelligence as a term, as a title or a heading is often given to products and processes especially, that in my view are not intelligence as I would recognise and define the term. But in fact they're something else and a really good example of that is data or information and I'm sure we'll cover that in a different session.

Those data or information products are often called intelligence products. That is either a mistake or a misguided effort to try and suggest they're of a different, sometimes a higher value than what they might be worth if they were what I would call true intelligence. That's not to say data and information don't have a value, they do. Because of what they are, they can actually be worth more than an intelligence product, certainly in the terms I would define it.

The third thing I'd say, and I still haven't defined it, is as far as I'm concerned, particularly within law enforcement, but in fact within most professions, I don't think intelligence processes and products are science in the truest term. And what I mean here, and I'm putting my academic scientific head on, is what you might term pure science tends to follow very rigorous processes and methods of data collection to come to its conclusions. Mathematics and physics are two classic examples.

By contrast, intelligence processes and products don't. A product of science may or may not have any practical value whatsoever, either to the person who's created it, to other people. It's merely a product. It doesn't mean always, but the prime process of a science approach is to generate a product that is followed through and can be examined by an independent third party to have followed the rigorous processes of data collection and examination and conclusions. Intelligence isn't like that.

When you come into law enforcement but in most intelligence communities what you're actually talking about is generating something that's of practical value. It's a process that generates a product that allows you to make a decision usually, that leads to action. It shall we say it loses some of its potentially scientific value to get its greater value in terms of being a practical product and therefore ultimately it's a human product.

It's not a biological or a chemical or a physical product, it's something designed and developed by humans as a communications means and a means of understanding [the] environment to inform their decisions and actions.

It doesn't need to be totally scientific and of that very high value in terms of shall we say data science, again typical term data science, to be a value it can be lesser does that make sense does that sort of set the scene for it?

Mark

I think so, I think what you've just demonstrated and I would have done exactly the same here is when we try and answer the question, we always give a long answer, don't we? Because essentially the short answer to anybody that asks is, well Intel, the short but wrong answer is it's information that's been treated in a specific way to aid some sort of decision making.

That's a rough definition. I think the CIA once had a prize for somebody who came up with a better definition. I think there's been attempts to say anything that kind of reduces uncertainty and all that kind of stuff.

Why we fall into long explanations is because it's not immediately clear. Intelligence is one of those words where we have, everyone has a gut feeling about what it is. From people who have never worked with it before. People who have worked in intelligence have got a same gut feeling, which is very different.

I think from my experience, I think it's helpful to maybe look at the word from a few different angles. So like before I joined the police and I was a civilian, to me, intelligence was a very James Bond, Hollywood term that I thought meant secrets or information gathered under some sort of kind of covert means and there was an excitement and it was intertwined with espionage and there was, there was a, there was a polish on the word.

That's despite me coming from an information science academic background, but I was still charmed by the word. And then I would say by the end of my police career, I'd seen how intelligence as a word, as a label, could be used in lots of different ways. Sometimes for different reasons, by the same people, for different purposes.

So sometimes intelligence is a product, as you alluded to. Sometimes intelligence is a process, and you alluded to that too. Sometimes it's a shield, it's something to hide behind, because if I say to somebody, I have some information that X is happening, if I say, if I have some intelligence that X is happening, it almost gives it a gravitas and a weight just by the change of the word.

Whether that's valid or not is a separate thing. And I think what I would like from the word intelligence is. I think that I'm with you. I don't think intelligence or intelligence analysis is scientific in the notion. I don't think you can study intelligence in the lab.

I think you can study human communication and human documentation and things like that. But I think it's more art than science. And I think it's more about how it's more, I think it's wrapped up in the organisation as well. I think I'm gonna get the dates wrong here, but I think if I'm right, if you look at some of the military histories of like US Army and some of the like the British and French armies, if you look at how they were structured, essentially they didn't start having

intelligence departments until I think the mid to late 1800s I think it was, because there was still quite a disdain for espionage and intelligence and it was all kind of kept off book and spies were spies and it was kind of bit dishonorable and then slowly I think pre-World War II though we slowly had this thing where shall we say statistical information, other observational information and the secrets and traitor stuff was starting to be smuggled into an organisational context where we started to get the intelligence type departments arising and intelligence would then become this summary term to say, "what intelligence do we have about a situation?"

But the problem is, now I've just done what you've just done. I've just given a very long answer to what is a very simple question and I don't think I've done it justice and anybody listening to this might be thinking, okay, what?

I would say that I think this is the challenge for intelligence staff is there is a possibility here that intelligence is a label used by some very niche and some very singular organisations and people for a very singular kind of process. I used to think in the middle of my police career, wouldn't it be great if the entire world was run in an Intel kind way where we're doing Intel assessments, we had analysts for this, analysts for that.

But now I'm not so sure. Now I think humans have ways of dealing with information and I think Intel is a formal way of dealing with information. But as you said, science is another and there's plenty of others to go at.

Howard

I agree with you and I think the easiest way is to let it wash over you as a human being. It's actually easier to define what intelligence usually is not rather than what it is. But I really like your suggestion that it's an art because it is good Intel or good intelligence products that lead to good actions, generated by good intelligence operatives (and let's not get into the ever decreasing circle of what do mean by those things) that kind of material that insight can come from one or multiple processes and products that are different for individuals.

I have known people who I consider to be extremely competent intelligence operatives, analysts who couldn't come up with intelligence of value if their life depended on it.

They're very good practitioners of the methodologies and the rules and processes and guidelines that these cultures set out. But they don't have that second level, that ability to join the dots, if you will, within the data to come up with a pattern that's not only useful, but has some level of accuracy. You know, it's not just a pie in the sky theory.

I have known by contrast individuals, be they investigators, operatives, analysts, who have had an ability to come up with an insight that's truly revolutionary. It opens your eyes to a whole new vista of theories and potential opportunities or risks in a practical sense. But they could never explain how they did it.

I wouldn't want to exclude or be quite didactic about one's correct and one's the other. think for all the procrastinating we do about it. The best way to learn about what Intel is is to work with people who have this understanding and maybe struggle to define it. I have a problem with people who can define intelligence and they go to a pat answer because there's no one answer and if they're doing that a bit like AI might search what's out there on the internet, paraphrase it all into some common definition. I think a lot of the so-called Intel experts or the definition writers are trying to come up with something and no one size fits all.

The ultimate is it's an insight for me of value for yourself as a human being in trying to understand the situation that's developing or maybe requires some action in the future to modify your behaviour.

Secondly, just as importantly, you can communicate that importance to other people, other customers who may have the responsibility or the desire to be considering those same issues and trying to come up with decisions and actions that might create what they might consider a desirable outcome. And that's really generic and kind of out there.

I'd rather be that loose, than come up with [a specific definition] I mean I've probably seen 250 different definitions of intelligence within law enforcement in my approaching half a century experience of it and some of them are blatantly wrong. Most of them are blatantly simplistic or shall we say focused into a particular area and quite a lot of them are mistaken in terms of their semantics.

A really good example, North American law enforcement, particularly the military side, but it's drifted over into civilian law enforcement, is the terms HUMINT or SIGINT. These little convenient mnemonics or abbreviations. HUMINT, human intelligence. SIGINT, signal intelligence. Well when you say human intelligence what do you mean? Do you mean the intelligence that a human being has as their intellectual capability that sets us apart from the animals if you follow that train of thought or do you mean intelligence that's generated by humans for example the kind of the spying that you talked about the witness who goes and observes and collects information and comes back and reports it to a third party you see where this definition problem starts coming in for what you're talking about.

Signals intelligence, SIGINT. All that is is a common term for machine traffic between device A and device B that are communicating and it may be radio waves it may be mobile phones, normal phones, any kind of IT data or stuff down a cable doesn't matter but it's a machine talking to a machine but lest we forget most machines don't talk to other machines, just because machines have decided that's a good thing to do.

Human beings designed those machines and created the pathways in the communication networks for them to talk to each other and the language and the lexicons and the data sharing for a human purpose. So we have mobile phones so that I can ring you, you can ring whoever

and we can have a conversation.

That's the mobile phone and the only difference between the landline is the connection between the two devices and, then of course it gets more complicated with smartphones and all the other features. Ultimately it's about facilitating a human being talking to another human being so SIGINT it's not just the pure signals like a carrier wave.

I'm old enough to remember televisions where at the end of programming because it wasn't 24-7 at midnight it would bring up basically a colour chart [test card] and bing bing bang [big ben] from end of the day signal or in the UK's case the national anthem and then you'd have that test signal kind of the oscilloscope or just white noise on the screen. That's still machines talking to each other but they're just showing that the link is there. There's no actual data of value in that white noise. Does that make sense?

Mark

For sure, I wanna go back to a few of the things you said. Trying to keep us bound to intel, because we are gonna cover a lot of this in what is analysis, what is kind of all the other stuff. I'm tempted to go into CIA and Sherman Kent and all of it. But I think just to go back to first principles of Intel, intelligence with a big I. I think you're right. In terms of the codification of intelligence, you're right, there is that.

I believe it was CIA, but it might have been US military before that, about the codification of information to HUMINT, SIGINT and all the rest of it. I agree with what you're saying, which is, you know, there's overlap there. And sometimes it's not clear what it's referring to. It's kind of the intent, I think, is to basically highlight a more general tradition in intelligence practice, which is, and one of the things I think is the most valuable from the Intel world is, once you start working in the Intel world, you are trained in various ways to basically, first of all, ask yourself what is the information saying? But crucially, who's saying it? And also, how do you know?

I remember the Colin Powell quote, tell me what you know, tell me what you don't know and tell me what you think and kind of distinguish which is which. I think that that for me or another thing, which is, I mean, this is in the public domain, but you know, the codification of Intel in UK law enforcement, you when we talk about the national intelligence model and we talk about basically looking at the source of the information and looking at the nature of the information, and even potentially how the information may be used.

So what I'm getting at is that Intel as a professional doctrine gets you to kind of break everything down into a series of claims, who's making those claims and how is that claim captured? Was it captured under duress? Were there many sources aimed to please and things of that kind.

We're back to that kind of the mystery part, isn't it? Where it's like, and I see this in, over the

recent decades where governments across the world, well, sometimes it'll be, "we have intelligence that suggests X" and that intelligence belies some sort of hidden process or some sort of complicated process. But sometimes the Intel word and I think in modern times, sometimes the Intel words being dropped now, it's we have information. I do wonder if Intel, kind of peaked around like kind of Cold War, post Cold War, 90s, noughties, and maybe some of the issues that you're alluding to, think now, you know, maybe are coming through, that's the channel it's coming through now because the term intelligence is perhaps starting to lose its mystique and maybe even have a negative value, maybe be a signal that, okay, you're attempting to obscure the situation here by calling it intelligence.

Howard

That's music to my ears because at the end of the day it goes right back to what I said at the start the misuse of the term is usually there designed to give something value or greater value than maybe it had if it wasn't called Intel and you and I both know many instances where we've had information products, files of data that have been codified, put into a binder that looks very imposing and authoritative and therefore must be believed as added value and they call that an intelligence product.

The national intelligence model itself fell into that trap to a great extent because it was trying to create what was primarily a product that contained lots of information and data, and some intel, it was all called the Intel product.

So you see now a really good example: the past few days we have the interesting situation of the Americans doing targeted bombing of nuclear sites. The president and the normal process for previous presidents of the US has been to be cautious about outcomes and consequences of action until they know what the outcomes are.

In other words yes we've carried out a bombing campaign the mission went well you know the service personnel who were deployed arrived and came home safely there were no operational mistakes but in terms of the outcome the impact of the bombs in terms of to what extent did the influence the target or carry out whatever the objective of the strike was and it's not for me to say what that was.

It's almost secondary but straight away the current president Trump goes on television and says great mission we have obliterated the target. Now again this is about language. Obliteration to me, and it is just my interpretation, means it's 100% totally and completely gone almost forever. I know nothing's forever, but to all intents and purposes.

Unfortunately, then you have an intelligence assessment, and this is where the terms come in, from within the US military establishment that says, well actually, and it does qualify to say this is low-grade intelligence at this point, we could be really wrong because we're working on limited data and I'm paraphrasing.

So it does the right thing in terms of trying to quality assure and you know make the audience acutely aware that there's a big health risk on the value or otherwise of the conclusions. But that report says we think it's actually it may well be a limited impact in terms of a) it may not have destroyed everything and we start talking about percentage terms or particular areas that have been destroyed and depths and b) you then get organisations like the atomic energy authorities coming forward and saying, well we have information that the target nation actually moved the majority of the enriched uranium it was storing at that site anyway so even if the site was destroyed 100%, a lab's just a lab.

I know it's a complex thing but you can build another one but the raw material product that generated that's the problem that's at risk which is enriched uranium could be basically stuck on a container or in a barrel somewhere else waiting for another factory to be built so they haven't lost the raw material it's kind of like bombing in World War II, bombing Messerschmitt factories to stop them building planes.

But it didn't stop the fact that there were already planes that had been built that were in operation. And it didn't stop things like the plants that made ball bearings, steel, instrument technology, all the raw materials and components that only got finally assembled to become, in that case, a Messerschmitt. Does that make sense? So then you have the backlash.

"No, no, no, the president can't be wrong". He's right. It's been obliterated. And then the CIA director stands up and says, well, I can't tell you what the information is, but I've got intelligence. And again, it's this inference. I've got something that's of more value and super secret that you all don't know that I can't tell you about suggests that there's been very serious damage. So already we've come away from complete obliteration.

I'm making no case for or against the politics and the personalities involved. I have no interest in that from an Intel and analysis point of view but from an academic point of view this is a classic real-life example going off right now of misusing the terms to try and add or take value away. I was mindful of quite recently the appointee in the US for National Intelligence Director, and I apologise I've got the title of the role wrong, a lady called Tulsi Gabbard, who I don't know and I have never met.

She runs these agencies and gave answers I believe to a congressional hearing saying our information, our intelligence is that the nation involved are not anywhere near building a nuclear bomb. I think that somewhere back in March, it's fairly recent. The President says, no, they were within days or weeks of making a bomb.

As a justification, and he presented it, I didn't, he chose to use that for that purpose. You know, this is why we bombed, because there were days or weeks from making a bomb. And when questioned about that, saying, with the media saying, but excuse me, very, you know, your own, the National Intelligence Director that you appointed said otherwise only weeks ago, she and

they are wrong.

And it's kind of like going back to term one of his presidency with Putin. You know, I believe Putin, I don't believe the national intelligence agencies. That kind of processing, and it doesn't matter whether any of it's true or false, of itself destroys trust and confidence in intelligence versus information products. Does that make sense?

Mark

It does. mean, so I think the key takeaway there is to basically say that the claim is the crucial part. So I'm not a Middle East expert and nor am I a nuclear weapons expert, but I'm going to use a crude analogy. If I'm building a trampoline in my garage, the claim that people have stopped my ability to build trampolines, well, how do you do that.

If you blow up my garage, as you said, I could build another garage. Maybe I can buy another trampoline. Maybe the component parts of that trampoline are elsewhere. I think in the claims you mentioned, they were very specific about a physical, I nearly said bricks and mortar. I don't know what the materials were, but the structure. A structure was obliterated. That's not necessarily the strategic intent or campaign. And it's not necessarily the capability or the intent.

And those are broad things, aren't they? But I think what the other takeaway from that is, that the intel will never know, truthfully, but you can use it for PR purposes. And it's good comms, isn't it? It's good comms to say we have done X. We have that trampoline will never be built because we've blown up that particular garage. And you can rest easy because the trampoline has now been put to bed.

I want to kind of move away from the Middle East a little bit, if that's okay. We'll come back to it maybe. I think there's something to be said about how governments use Intel privately for decision making and publicly for comms. But we could spend an entire hour on that, Because obviously Britain's got history with that, the US has got a history with that. We need to pay that due diligence.

What I would like to ask you about, if you don't mind, is you were in the police prior to the national intelligence model. But I would imagine we're using what we call intelligence in a different way, perhaps more informal way. I'm just wondering if you could describe life in the police from an intel side prior to NIM and then maybe talk about the introduction of NIM after that. And the reason I'd like to do that is to try and understand because I have this romanticised version in my head, that pre-NIM, Intel was quite informal, know, flying by the seat of your pants, just kind of make it up as you go along and everything else. And then NIM came along and kind of started nailing things down because we had to assign costs to things and had to formalise things. So yeah, if that's okay, if you're comfortable with that, I think that would be really insightful.

Howard

Absolutely, If I can take you back through the mists of time. I joined the police in late 1981 so from that point I had personal knowledge, of how in my case UK policing, particularly my force at that time, worked in terms of how it gathered information. We didn't have intelligence units.

We had what they called collators. I can remember going to the force, they had local officers in each district area and then they had a force office near to headquarters and what the collators did, how can I describe it, imagine a scaled up oil drum laid on its side on a spindle.

I'm talking seven eight twenty feet long in some cases a big thing and there were several of these and around this thing rather like a card rolodex and again for those people who are younger look at what a card rolodex is, the contacts. These drums had lines going all the way around 360 degrees of little cards and these cards clicked onto holders on the drum.

So when you rotated the drum rather like you'd put a playing card in the spokes of a pedal cycle when you're a child to make it sound like an engine clap clap clap every time it hit the spoke when you rotated the drum it brought round these cards and I'm talking about thousands upon thousands upon thousands of cards.

These cards were generally typed on a typewriter and sometimes they were even handwritten and they certainly had loads of little additions and comments on them because clearly to create one of those and put it into the system was quite a labour and to modify it would mean taking it out and everything else, lots of other actions and then try to put it back in the right place.

These machines, if you will, were the databases of the day. They were created by the collators, these human beings. And one would be the collator for burglaries, one would be the collator for jewelries [thefts], one would be a collator for homicide or violence. They were categorised [by] specialists in a crime type, not in a type of information [source] a particular form or particular source like human information (HUMINT) or telecoms.

We didn't have telecoms in that form then we had line phones. Then you think about what they did. They would collect information from across the organisation and externally, where somebody would ring up or they would send a written note, because we didn't have computers to say I've heard something about Billy the burglar last night he was seen at Beep Avenue in Beep Town acting suspiciously.

Now what value that has we don't know we never knew. How it was checked and confirmed and quality assured before it was put into the system we never knew because it was all subjective, but basically these collators would take that written report and it might be a long report from somewhere that had lots of pieces of information. Some that related to Billy the burglar, some that related to other offences or the location so that one report may go around several collators and each one would tease out of it a particular piece rather like highlighting and put that onto a

card and then they would decide where in this rolodex this card went. So when somebody asked a question of that system they would contact the collator and say have you got anybody committing that might fit a pattern for committing burglaries in Beep Town or homicides in another area or is a well-known jewellery thief who has this kind of method of operation.

This is how he or she commits their crime the collator would go to this rolodex and think I'll go through the index system that he or she had created not a standardised process around the whole of the UK or even within that force and they would go through their own homemade and that's what they were ultimately databases and look for maybe what they are.

I remember writing something about a guy there. So you had no guarantee that the database that you had created was accurate, was as flexible as we might find with an IT database and searching these days, was easily updated and had a lifespan. I can remember looking going to the collators looking at homicides and finding cards going back to early 70s for offenders who committed offences before that particular force that I was a member of had even been created as an organisation.

So that kind of information decay and the process to manage that didn't really exist effectively then. So the hope was maybe somebody's put some information into the system that one of these collators has extracted and put into this database that when I've asked the question, maybe they'll recall or be able to go through their retrieval process to find the gift to me and say, maybe this is significant. That was the reality. So basically you've got a completely human system. The machine side of it was merely primitive index system and recording system that summarised the raw data. You certainly couldn't go back and look at the original reports from that collator's rolodex and you couldn't share that.

If you were from another organisation or another force you would ring up and say I'm trying to look for burglars or maybe not burglars, not a good example but homicides if we looking for some kind of series of homicides that crossed organisational boundaries geographically. Have you got any homicides where the MO involves ABCD?

And maybe they have, maybe they haven't. But the point that always stood out to me and still does in the databases we create today was not just have you got it in the system, but what if it's some new method that's never been captured? So it's real in real life, but the system that we have created hasn't actually found a way of capturing and then making available for querying, that data.

Now that's not to decry the system or the individuals. They were viewed as gods. I mean they were only kind of in a rank term, they were very low ranking, mainly civilians. The control they had over the data and was so impactive and subjective that they were the go-to. So they had massive influence far more than their rank or their role might have implied.

Does that make sense?

Mark

It does, can I just ask a couple of quick questions? I find it fascinating, the large drum index files, it reminds me of, I don't know you've come across the guy Paul Otlet, I think, French guy [ERROR- He was Belgian] in the 1800s, did like a bibliographic reference system, like the precursor to the internet, know, massive card index system. And to me, I think it's a under recognised thing how police forces across the decades were kind of early adopters of tech because we dealt with so much information, right? And I think West Yorkshire had the ripper and that led to kind of a paradigm shift in information.

Bringing it back to Intel though, I'm curious, you've mentioned that an example where people would ring up or people would get in contact with a local police station and it would get physically written on a card and the card would be stored in that person's physical system. Can you tell how that integrated with like, essentially, snouts, human intel sources, the secret stuff, the quiet stuff.

Was that all informal or did that make it as far as a card index or was that basically, was like a two tier system where the public stuff was on the cards but the super sensitive stuff was off book and just in people's heads?

Howard

Absolutely. And this for me was another feeling of the system, which reminded me of the aftermath of the inquiries into 9/11, this idea of stovepipe Intel where information of a form in agency A was not shared with B or with other areas. These collators indices were primarily, what I would call low grade or uncorroborated information or unevaluated.

Remember the public. It might be a police officer saying I walked down the street and at half past three last night and I saw somebody skulking about acting suspiciously down an alley. It's data. What its value and meaning is at that time we don't know but later on with hindsight when somebody something else happens there may be a cause and effect value to it that nobody knows.

But it was that level in the collators index of factual information like Billy the burglar was convicted at such and such Crown Court for 89 burglaries and he admitted a further 200 and when you look at them all they were in this area using this MO so chances are, people being creatures of habit past behavior may indicate future intent, so it may have value in future.

What happened though, was more interesting information shall we say from more specialist sources like informants people who provided information to the law enforcement for reward, be that financial or some other form of goods or reduced sentences or the police looking the other way, which is what all shall we say spy processes involved, to some extent there's this

very loose standard in terms of ethics and integrity, but that's the real world.

That was not put into those central systems if you wanted to access that you had to go to the people who dealt with those informants. There were individual officers often in specialist units just as they are now who would have a personal relationship with these people.

So if you wanted to know about that you would ring the officer who was the handler in more modern terms of that information resource and say has your informant given you anything that may be relevant on this or you might even take it further and say would you go away and I know you know have you got an informant who lives in this area or frequents this community, this particular criminal community or behavioural group? Have you got somebody in there who could proactively gather information that's of value to me and then pass it back and we will reward them for it.

So it wasn't just tell me what you know it was go out and find, the old analogy of the king sending the spy overseas in medieval times. But the problem with that process was that the human beings, the specialists who controlled these informants, were, because they were privileged in terms of the control, were difficult to manage and quality assure. Their value to the organisation rested on the information that their informants produced. So there was always this bias towards keep the information secret to me, from my informant because I want that informant to be my informant and they're not. You know if you work for a law enforcement or any organisation the information you have belongs to the organisation it's not yours.

The process also had no way of sensibly assessing the motivation or the ability of the information source, this spy person, this specialist gathering the information.

Time and time again within law enforcement and the military double agents people who were deliberately providing misinformation for reward or to confuse or misdirect the client of the information, there's no control of that so the central user at least with the card index you could require the collator to pull out the original report that said in full text what was summarised on the card so you could carry out your own personal assessment.

You could never do that for confidential information and by and large that's been one of its biggest problems that still to an extent, continues today. The same happens with undercover operatives. These are people employed by the organisation to go out and gather information.

Because of the need for security and the need for what we would call tradecraft protection for how we do it and who they are. The ability for the rest of the organisation to access that and quality assure, firstly access the product at all, but then quality assure it for its relevance or test it against whatever the issue is they're trying to understand is systemically flawed.

So you're always you've got that trade-off between quantity and quality and shall we say grades

of intelligence or information, also your ability to test whether it's any use or not.

I can show you countless examples and you know this of law enforcement agencies deliberately withholding or sharing misinformation with other agencies who are working in the same arena trying to deal with the same problem because of organisational pride or performance success.

A lot of this training that we would do for intelligence operatives and investigators would be around. Do you understand how this human nature, this human bias or organisational bias and culture is completely at odds, with trying to achieve as full and accurate a picture as possible on which you can then come up with theories and make decisions and test theories and hopefully get successful outcomes.

Mark

That's really interesting. I'm tempted to go for all sorts of directions with that. I do want to go into digitisation of records and deep dive into that, but I think that's for another episode. Just for now though, and I appreciate this is, this might be a tough question to answer, but being that you've seen both sides, you've seen the old school Intel and the post digitisation Intel, is it a clear case of one was better than the other? Do you have a personal preference? What's your final take on the old world versus the new world?

Howard

That's an interesting one. I actually don't see a difference because I think as a journeyman we are part way along the timeline of a continuing process of change and I can see people like ourselves having the same conversation in 5, 10, 15, 20 years.

What I would say is, on the one hand, everything has increased in complexity. It's not just a question of volume of data. It's the complexity. It's not just a question of the volume of tools and people who are stakeholders in the process, the organisational boundaries, shall we say, extending.

I think it's about the complexity. Now how does that affect? Well alright there's the volume argument in terms of how much data or information you have to handle, how complex are the processes, how more complex and varied are the tools that we use to analyse or to process this data and who were the potential stakeholders. Again that's all more complex.

I think for me although it's more complex, and that offers the potential for more benefit in terms of you might hope that with that complexity and improved knowledge, data access, tools to manipulate the data, you would end up with a better product. I think the downside of the process, which is ongoing as we speak, is that it's less quality assurable if that is even such a word.

The data that we gather we put into our processes or the information that we gather and put in is many many many stages more removed from real life, when it gets to us than it was when we were almost two or three or four stages a small number of stages away from collecting the data.

That means between it being gathered in the environment and presented to us as Intel operatives it could have well it will have gone through many forms of manipulation that may change it whether that be accidental as a result of the pass the parcel, slide here, every time you pass something you change it but [there are often] also deliberate attempts to change it.

The processes that we use are more complex, yes. We now have tools, particularly technical tools to manipulate this data. But do we really know how they work? Can we QA those tools to have confidence in the products that they generate from this data? The more we become reliant on them, makes this a really important point.

And the third thing is, what are the products we're being asked to produce? And how influential are they on stakeholders? Are they something that can be applied locally for an immediate short-term effect or they likely to be shared amongst multiple stakeholders at different times who may have very different motives. So I think for me, that motivation matters. What's the motivation behind the change in the data and the data systems and the information systems?

What's the motivation behind how those systems manipulate and change the data from what I would call best evidence, the best information to what lands on our desk or into our computer database? What's the motivation of the people who design the tools?

Are they are they designing something that's really the best that it could be for the task that we're trying to set it or is it limited and they they actually teach us to limit our expectations rather than fixing the problem or the shortfall in the product because at the end it's a business and finally who are the customers?

The product that we're turning out who's going to use it, are they going use it in the right way, in the right setting, with the right QA? So we're in these uncharted territory. So it's kind of two extremes. On the one hand, we've got volume and complexity as a potential plus, but this lack of ability to QA, I think is a negative. And the skill for us as interoperatives and analysts is to recognise that we still have to work with it. It's our daily bread and butter.

And it's going to carry on down those two divergent trends potentially. But hey, that's the everyday role of a professional information intelligence analyst and data scientist.

Mark

Fair enough. I'll go one step further. I, even though I wasn't in the first world, I do have this romanticised notion that I think pen, paper and physical media might, the benefit of getting all that, I think sometimes is, I remember in the book Spycatcher, I know a lot of people in Intel,

they get really excited about the Ring of Five. I'll be honest, it bores me stupid. I'm not really into traitors too much to be honest.

One really interesting thing in that book is a bit where he talks about how back then MI5 had something called the registry where basically every file and every record was in a physical location, like a library essentially, but you had to physically go there, physically book out the material. Everything was logged, go into a reading room. You were monitored, questions, eyebrows were raised about you. So I do sometimes wonder if that in that environment, there's a more ritualistic and there's more control.

If we perhaps took the kind of the stuff seriously, the problem with digitisation is everything is so easily captured. But sometimes when we, yes, we can put access trackers on, we can see who's access to record, but then the first thing is what wasn't me, somebody's hacked my password or somebody's pretending to be me. It instantly introduces that doubt, doesn't it? So, but I think I've got a highly romanticised view.

Howard

You're right, but ultimately everything we do is a human decision and a human process. Just because the data is there, the information is there and the complexity is there doesn't mean it's right or doesn't mean that it's easy to access.

Doesn't mean it's right or it doesn't mean it's of value or importance or relevance to the human processes you're putting it through and the human decisions you're providing a product for people to take.

So welcome to the reality of Intel and ever may it be so. Adapt. Good professionals adapt and we will continue to do so or we will wither on the vine as they say and we will no longer be relevant.

Mark

I think that's a good place to wrap it up. So thank you for today. Thank you for listening everybody. And we'll see you on the next pod. Take care.