Intelligence

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What is intelligence in a nutshell?

Intelligence is simply the systematic collection, processing and analysis of information to understand a specific topic or threat. Decision-makers and other stakeholders can then use that knowledge to decide how to act in order to reach their goals.

It's less about James Bond and more about drafting reports, evaluating data, mining databases and investigating complex trails of transactions and other relevant connections.

What types of intelligence are there?

The type of intelligence produced depends on the goals. It can be strategic – a general assessment of challenges faced by an organisation – or operational to counter specific and detailed challenges in the short or medium term. Most of the time, decision-makers need a combination of both.

Let's take an example from the Illegal Wildlife Trade programme I'm involved in at the Basel Institute. Say a shipping company wants to stop its containers being used to transport illegal wildlife products. To adjust its strategy and align resulting actions, it first needs a series of strategic intelligence reports about the main trafficking routes, the type of people and companies involved, loopholes that are being exploited, typologies and red flags to look out for, among other things.

This is *strategic* intelligence. The company can use it as input for strategic planning and to support concrete general actions, such as closing loopholes in its procedures or adding extra screening in high-risk areas.

On the other hand, a confidential *operational* intelligence report might alert the company to a specific shipment, for example a container sailing from an African port and destined for Asia that is linked to previous companies involved in IWT and has other red flags. Actions resulting from this intelligence might be physical examination of the container.

How does intelligence reduce information overload?

Intelligence analysis cuts out the masses of irrelevant or unreliable data that we are flooded with today. In my parents' time, the main difficulty was finding enough information on which to base a decision. These days, decision-makers frequently suffer from infoxication – information overload – that overwhelms their ability to think clearly and see the big picture. We are lost in a sea of data and information – and criminals know this very well.

By processing and integrating this mass of disparate information in a targeted, consistent way, intelligence analysts can weave a coherent picture that allows the end user to take effective, evidence-based decisions.

How do you know whether intelligence is reliable?

A good intelligence report will make it clear how reliable the intelligence is. The most common method for evaluation is a matrix that ranks the reliability of the information and the reliability of the source(s). Other methods include indicators of depth or bias, for example.

Just as importantly, intelligence reports should also point out limitations in the available information and gaps in our knowledge – what we don't know as well as what we do.

Decision-makers should note these limitations and avoid taking decisions that are skewed by the availability or lack of information. Even more dangerous is when a decision-maker simply acts blindly "on a hunch", ignoring the nuances of intelligence reports and knowledge black holes. History shows that this can lead to catastrophic business decisions and even to war.

How is intelligence produced?

Intelligence analysts usually manage the process of creating intelligence by following an "intelligence cycle". The cycle is pretty flexible and can be adapted to different workflows, but the basic steps are:

1. **Direction**: It is essential to have a clear purpose and a set of specific goals so the analyst knows what knowledge is required, who will use it and what it will be used for. Plus the most important point: what question does the organisation need answered?
2. **Data collection**: Based on a collection plan, data and information are gathered widely and systematically. They could come from a range of sources, including open-source databases, the media and people knowledgeable about the subject.
3. **Processing**: Sorting, filtering and evaluating the data to identify what is most relevant and reliable. This is the infoxication-fighting bit.
4. **Analysis**: Weaving together separate pieces of information, identifying links and creating a coherent intelligence report that clearly identifies the key points as well as limitations and unknowns.
5. **Dissemination**: Delivery to the end user – law enforcement, the military, business leaders or the policy-makers who will use it to help take a decision and support effective action.

If the same report will be received by different types of user with different goals and functions, the analyst might recommend specific actions for each different user group.

For example, the same intelligence report about a suspected incident of wildlife trafficking in an African port would recommend different actions by law enforcement officials, financial institutions and shipping companies.

Further resources on intelligence analysis

- Our free eLearning course on Operational Analysis on the Basel Institute LEARN platform offers an interactive, hands-on introduction to the intelligence cycle and how to use it to gather intelligence in a structured way.
- For super-powered open-source intelligence research, check out our Basel Open Intelligence tool.

Published on 2 May 2019
baselgovernance.org/blog/manuel-medinas-quick-guide-intelligence

ISSN 2673-5229

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