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How to improve it

The DI's Product Review Process

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". . .it is worth remembering that the basic purpose of the review process is to take the individual ideas or judgments of a single analyst or a few analysts, and turn those ideas or judgments into the institutional position of the Central Intelligence Agency."

DDI Newsletter
12 January 1984

From the standpoint of intelligence analysis *per se*, the product review process is one of the central fixtures of professional life in the Directorate of Intelligence (DI). It is also an aspect of intelligence work that deserves more attention and study than it has traditionally received. While attitudes toward review vary tremendously across the directorate, most observers agree that the process could be improved. The last DI-wide survey on the subject, conducted in late 1988 by the DI Management Advisory Group (MAG), found that the biggest single complaint from analysts was not with the process itself but with management's failure to follow the prescribed process. I would argue that as a directorate we do not have any "prescribed" process, and that many of the problems with review can be traced to this basic lack of a conceptual framework.

For new analysts, review can be an unexpected, humbling experience that seems to contradict many of the norms of their academic experience. In the case of complex or contentious pieces review can be a grueling exercise, even for experienced analysts. In some cases, the outcome of the process may be a decision not to publish, with months of research and writing seemingly wasted. One of the most common grievances expressed by analysts is that there are too many layers of review, leading to contradictory requirements and redundant or "circular" revisions. Managers have to deal with similar problems, though from a different perspective. Their greatest challenge is often to mediate conflicting positions and produce compromise language without gutting the analysis. And, finally, for all involved the process can sometimes be protracted and exhausting. Many of us have heard stories about items for the *National Intelligence Daily* (NID) that took a week to coordinate or "hardcover" papers that took a year from first draft to final publication.

In my view, the existing review process is necessary and it is not fundamentally flawed. Many of its problems can be ameliorated, if not solved, by building a clearer shared understanding of its goals and purposes.

First Things First

The directorate has no succinct, common definition of review. Some DI offices have statements about how review is supposed to function. But these are usually mechanistic descriptions or production timetables detailing, for example, how much turnaround time each management echelon has for a paper. Because of differences in culture and subject matter, and the latitude given office directors by the Deputy Director For Intelligence, at this level the process can differ substantially from office to office.

In general terms, review is the contribution of the organization to the production of a particular intelligence product, as opposed to the contribution of the individual analyst. (This discussion deals primarily with the production of longer-term written intelligence products, though some if it applies to current pieces and high-level briefings.) This may seem obvious, but it is an important characterization because it reminds us that intelligence in whatever form it

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may take is essentially an amalgam of individual and organizational efforts, both of which have to be given their due. To depreciate the individual's contribution is to forget that all analysis has to begin with some person's intellectual effort; ignoring the organization's rightful role risks straying into the morass of analytical pride.

At a more specific level, review can be seen as having four basic elements: coordination, validation, editing, and production. These are not, however, sequential stages; they are logically, but not necessarily temporally, distinct. *Coordination*, which some mistakenly assume to be synonymous with review, is the quality-control part of the process. It consists of the examination of a particular piece of intelligence by others in the organization to eliminate errors of fact, to identify additional perspectives that might not have occurred to the author, and to ensure that the judgments drawn are congruent with those taken by other DI components.

Validation is the adoption by the organization of the analysis contained in the product as its corporate position. It is the heart of the process. Validation formally occurs when the product receives final approval from the appropriate management level, but it actually takes place throughout the process, beginning with management's decision to undertake the project. Through the sometimes innumerable coordination meetings and draft rewrites, the organization gradually takes "ownership" of the product from the analyst. This is often difficult for both parties: the analyst has to learn to give up total control of substance, while the organization has to take care not to muddle or compromise the analytical message. Even after final approval, some may remain skeptical of a piece's analytical line. There is nothing wrong in this. When the Agency puts its seal on a product, it signifies only an organizational consensus, not a unanimity of opinion. In cases where opposing views are held by a significant minority, differences can and should be reflected in the draft itself.

Broadly speaking, the goals of the *editorial* stage of review are to improve the readability and organization of the text and bring it into conformance with the DI writing style. Good editors are able to improve the clarity of a piece while leaving substance unaffected. Because editing plays a role in refining the presentation of analysis, a critical aspect of intelligence production, it is properly considered part of review. Unfortunately, a basic problem with editing is that too many in the process view it as their responsibility, a fact that often leads to an unnecessary duplication of effort. For example, how many of us can recall expending considerable effort on the precise wording of a piece of current intelligence at the office level and below, only to have the NID Staff substantially reword it?

The final phase of the review process is usually dominated by *production*, during which the piece is prepared for publication by the Office of Current Production and Analytic Support production staff, the author, and his or her home office editorial staff. Although some might consider it inappropriate to include production as part of review, important decisions regarding the overall layout, the presentation of maps, figures and other visual aids, and the finalization of the piece's dissemination list are made only at this stage.

Perspectives on the Process

A majority in the DI regardless of position, seniority, or substantive speciality believe the review process is imperfect. In my experience, observers of it usually fall into one of three general categories. The first could be labeled the "pessimist" school. Its proponents argue that the existing process is systemically corrupt and that no amount of tinkering will cure its ills. For example, they cite the fact that those closest to "substance," the line analysts, have a weaker voice in deciding disputed intelligence judgments than their non-expert superiors. This, they sometimes hold, opens the doors to the politicization of intelligence. Others claim that minority positions are often submerged by the dominant corporate view, and that fresh, groundbreaking analysis cannot occur because of the demands of building consensus. In view of the seriousness of these shortcomings, they argue, the existing edifice of review should be razed and rebuilt.

A second, more mainstream group might be dubbed the "cynics." While disagreeing with the pessimists' contention that the process in inherently flawed, this

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group agrees that it is a waste of time to try to improve it. Cynics have witnessed many attempts to "fix" the review process, most of which they judge to have had little practical effect. They are, therefore, content to live with the prevailing process. It is difficult to generalize about the predominant attitudes of this group because they cover such a wide spectrum. Most seem to believe, however, that the shortcomings of review are a natural consequence of the conflict between the individual's desire for substantive creativity and judgmental freedom and the organization's demand for conformity and compromise. If the cynics had a motto, it probably would be: "When you can fix human nature, then you'll fix the review process." In an extreme form, some cynics have almost a "sink or swim" mentality: having put up with and succeeded in spite of the challenges posed by the review process, they see no reason why others, particularly new analysts, cannot do so as well.

I call the last group the "optimist" school. It believes that the process is not fundamentally defective and that its deficiencies can be remedied to some significant degree. The mark of an optimist is the willingness to entertain and at times to implement significant changes or experiments in the review process. Most are cautious, however, because they recognize that tinkering with a basically sound process has its risks. In a perverse way, the optimists in the DI probably are responsible for most of the shortcomings of the process because they have been in the vanguard over the years in refining the system. But this should not deter us from suggesting or attempting solutions.

Tackling the Problem

To my mind, all of the problems with the review process in the DI boil down to two: one substantive and one perceptual. The substantive problem is that the functions of the individuals involved in the process are not drawn clearly enough. This leads to a duplication of effort and unnecessary delays. What, for example, is the difference between the functions of the branch chief and the division chief? Should there be any difference? Among peers, where does the burden of persuasion lie with regard to disputed judgments, with those requesting change or with those resisting change? What is the threshold for including dissenting opinions in publications? In the case of editing, where does the branch chief's role end and the office editorial staff's begin? All of us have different answers to these questions but no common set of guidelines.

This problem could be substantially reduced if each of the participants in the process concentrated on that function that they perform best. For example, analysts are best suited to perform research and draft basic analysis. Branch chiefs have greater experience, and they are still in touch with the subject matter on a routine basis; they are best equipped to perform a thorough substantive check. Higher-level managers have greater experience, and they are more in touch with consumers; they are best able to examine the product for focus and policy relevance. And so it goes with all the other participants. Instead of having the perspective of producers who "assemble" a product, with each contributing his or her share to the as yet imperfect whole, we often seem more like artists who feel that the work of art can only go forward in "perfect" form (hence the stylistic editing at every level of review). We need more producers and fewer artists.

The perceptual problem with the review process is that each one of us defines it in a different way. Sometimes these differences are significant. The particulars of the process vary widely across the DI, and that is as it should be. But there exists no authoritative framework within which to structure the details. In the MAG survey, analysts felt most frustrated that management did not follow the prescribed process. This is a direct reflection of the varying expectations between analysts and managers about what review is and how it should function. This has sometimes contributed to a perception among analysts that, while they are held accountable for following the prescribed process, management has no such strictures.

When analysts join the DI, they are expected to be able to do research, analyze, and write. Such expectations are reasonable because these skills are tested on the PATB and because they are required to make it through the university system. It is curious, however, that we also seem to expect them to understand the review process without ever having been exposed to it. In the Office of Training and Education's (OTE) Analyst Training Course, a great deal of effort is rightly devoted to teaching new analysts how to write in the DI style. But the review

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process receives little attention, even though an understanding of it will be as important to an analyst's success as mastering the DI writing style. Similarly, in the Supervision of Analysis Course, new managers are taught how to review papers but not about the review *process* itself. OTE is not responsible, however, for this state of affairs; the DI has no formal review concept that could serve as a basis for such instruction.

Recommendations for Change

As a first step, the DI should develop and promulgate a directorate-level product review process concept, with which all individual office review procedures must be in accordance. The broad outlines of such a concept have already been defined, most recently in the DI Notice *Guidelines for Product Review, Coordination, and Incorporation of Alternative Views* (DI N 20-205, 2 June 1992). They now need to be developed further and formally published in a manual or similar document. This effort should involve both managers and analysts, and it should focus on elaborating an overarching concept of review that can be applied across all of the DI line offices, rather than establishing particular review procedures, which should be left up to the individual offices.

Once developed, this concept should be integrated into OTE training for analysts and managers in the DI. For analysts, this could be accomplished primarily through a block of instruction in the Analyst Training Course, which is required for all new analysts. It could also be presented in the Workshop for DI Midlevel Analysts and the DI Writing Workshop. Managers could receive instruction during the Supervision of Analysis Course, which is mandatory for all new branch chiefs. The DI review process concept could also be included in an analysis tradecraft manual, development of which was called for in another recent DI Notice. Over time, the concept would permeate the directorate and become its institutional philosophy. And, unlike the current situation, it would be explicit and commonly held. If experience so warrants, the concept could and should be modified as conditions change.

Toward a DI Review Philosophy

The DCI's task force on Politicization and Intelligence Production has already taken steps to address many of the concerns raised here. Their efforts are a good start toward developing a more clear-cut philosophy of review in the DI. Some of my thoughts on the possible substance of such a philosophy follow:

— The central purpose of review is to produce a product that represents the institutional position of the CIA.

— All other things being equal, fewer levels of review are better than more. There should exist a presumptive requirement to demonstrate that a new level of review will *significantly* improve the product before it is created.

— Review begins at the conceptual stage of a paper, not when analysis and drafting are completed, and it carries through to the final physical production stage.

— For the analyst, review is as much about giving up his or her sole control of the product as it is about getting others to take ownership of it.

— Even though the analyst plays the primary role in carrying out the day-to-day procedures of review, management should bear the ultimate responsibility for the success or failure of the process.

— All parties should be held accountable to the established review process, except in the most unusual circumstances.

— There is no room for ego or literary hubris in the review process. Intelligence production in the DI is a team effort in which compromise, next to the pursuit of truth, is the most highly valued commodity.

— Review is logically distinct from research but not from analysis. The intellectual scrutiny to which products are exposed during the process is an integral part of the final published analysis.

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— Greater emphasis should be put on timeliness. According to the recent DCI task force report on production, consumers believe that timeliness is sometimes a problem with DI products, and they generally value it more highly than quality of content.

— To reduce duplication of effort and enhance timeliness, participants in the process should concentrate on the task or function that they alone among the participants are best able to perform.

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