

Styles and Stereotypes in Intelligence Studies

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For a touch of individualism in the standardized product.

Droning monotony, fancy jargon, and Victorian stuffiness in government prose, long the butt of an excessive amount of satire, have again become a favorite target of journalists. A top official of the Department of State acknowledged the vulnerability in a recent speech before a group of career officers in his agency. Pointing out his concern over the abstruse style used in the reports which he received, he made a plea for the revival of the straightforward "declarative sentence" and for direct expression of ideas.

In this wave of public baiting intelligence writing has not been singled out for special attention, for the obvious reason that it is classified, has limited distribution, and does meet a high standard. On the other hand, it has certainly not escaped periodic jibes, often justified, from intelligence writers and editors and from the recipients of their products.

A truism about any form of communication is that effectiveness depends on not only what is said but how it is said. Format and style are perhaps even more important in intelligence than in most forms of writing. A keen analysis of any given event -ir development can be mangled in the process of presentation, for example by burying the critical portions in superfluous detail. The emphasis on brevity and clarity in intelligence reports implicitly recognizes that the key officials who are of influence in the formation of our foreign and defense policies are under a variety of pressures and demands, that they can devote only a limited part of their time to the great volume of intelligence materials

which flow across their desks. Aware of this competition for time and attention, all intelligence producers would like to feel that their efforts are presented as sharply, clearly, and effectively as possible.

Mass Perfection

A uniform style adopted by all producing agencies and for almost all types of intelligence production has been perfected to a degree which may have reached the point of being self-defeating. Extreme uniformity, even in perfection, risks having a deadening effect. Regardless of originator, subject matter, area, or type of study--from reports of coup attempts and general political estimates to specialized economic surveys--finished intelligence is beginning to have a remarkably familiar ring. How necessary is this uniformity?

Intelligence style has had to develop within the strict framework of acceptable official prose and of course is limited by these formal confines. However, since the product is classified and not subject to general scrutiny, it would appear that intelligence components should have at least a little more flexibility of expression than other government bureaus. In addition, it would have been reasonable to assume that the different intelligence agencies and the several staffs for different types of intelligence production--basic, current, estimative, etc.-would have attempted to achieve some degree of individuality, each developing its own style and format. But quite the opposite has happened.

One of the causes of uniformity is the widespread and recurring use of a high percentage of fashionable words and phrases derived from an invisible elite phrase book. Thus intelligence studies are generally chock-full of such words as image, posture, mystique, offload, dialogue, presence--terms currently considered choice in government, journalistic, and academic circles. To borrow a phrase from the sociologists, "cross-fertilization" explains the wide propagation of these terms. All producers are perusing the output of the others and consciously or unconsciously borrowing or plagiarizing from it. This literary osmosis soon becomes a kind of disease which adversely affects good writing.

The Editorial Compulsion

Not content with the osmotic leveling, editors have exercised their authority to impose an extreme rigidity of style on intelligence publications. Their usual explanation to the writer is that the next echelon of editors will perform even more drastic surgery on a manuscript if it is not carried out at the initial stage. Other rationalizations for manuscript changes go something like this: "We just don't use this word (or phrase)." "This is inappropriate to our style." Or "the chief simply writhes in anger whenever he sees this word." Most frequently, however, editors make changes in the interest of "the reader" (aka "consumer"). The editor smooths the ruffled feelings of the analyst in the following terms: "The reader will see a double meaning in this idea." "The reader won't understand the terminology in this context." "The reader will infer such-and-such from this paragraph." The clairvoyance of editors with respect to the thoughts and reactions of this lone reader is nothing less than preternatural. Embarrassingly, however, their psychic or telepathic finds are occasionally reversed by the higher editorial echelon, which not infrequently restores the analyst's original phrasing or something like it.

No one would deny that intelligence production of all types requires a closely controlled style and format in order to fulfill its purposes. Considerable uniformity is inevitable, in part because of the pressure of deadlines and the variance in writing skills among analysts. If the latter were unleashed to give expression to their personalities in their reports, chaos would soon reign and the reputation of the producing component be ruined. Some stereotyping, moreover, is necessarily introduced by the primary additive of finished intelligence--interpretation, estimates, analysis, meaning. These cannot be couched in absolutes, and the English language has just so many synonyms to qualify unknowns and signal the difference between fact, reported fact, and significance. The words possibly, probably, likely, unlikely, may be, seem, almost certainly, according to, presumably, allegedly, ostensibly, believed to be, and a few others are bound to recur in intelligence writing. They are accepted as indispensable guides and warnings.

But there still remains a small degree of undeterminism in the relatively rigid framework of both style and format. And this small bit of leeway could provide a refreshing breath of variety in intelligence presentation,

sharpening the interest and receptivity of the reader. For example, editors might lower the bars slightly to permit the occasional passage of sentences beginning with "But" or "And," a form of sentence structure widely approved in the best grammatical circles and highly effective when used sparingly. Or a single striking phrase without a predicate. The granting of such small liberties might encourage initiative and originality among analysts who otherwise tend to feel too hopelessly tethered by editorial regulations. Too often an analyst will excuse a perfunctory job of writing and organization on the ground that "the editors will rewrite the piece anyway, so why waste my time on anything but the content?" A greater flexibility in presentation than may be possible for periodic reporting under short deadlines would be feasible for special studies and memoranda which develop a subject in depth and detail and at greater leisure. An occasional sampling of consumer opinion could serve as a guide.

The Elegant Cliché

It is always easier to take negative action, and one eminently practicable means of improving intelligence presentation and at the same time eliminating some of its sameness requires only a negative action on the part of editors and analysts—the elimination of as many as possible of the popular clichés that saturate the content of most government and journalistic reporting. Clarity, accuracy, brevity, and directness are among the cardinal qualities of intelligence writing and indeed of any good non-fiction. These characteristics should not be confused with the excessive and often contrived introduction of terms once pungent and effective which through overuse have become a mere jargon, perpetuated to give the sophisticated a feeling of "belonging" and "togetherness." Shopworn pretentious phraseology can be distracting if not actually repelling to a reader.

For example, *image*, *posture*, *presence*, and *confrontation*. The flexible word "situation" should not be made a cover for all sins; it is often superfluous embroidery. A recent government publication mentioned "the fat cow surplus situation" in a particular foreign area; did the surplus of fat cows *have to be* a situation? And are we really being more sophisticated in saying that a cargo is "onloaded" or "offloaded?" The English-speaking

peoples survived for many centuries with plain-vanilla *load* and *unload*, and I have yet to get through my obtuse skull the advantage in the new coinage.

The following is a small sampling of currently fashionable clichés, listed for handy reference of analysts and editors. All of them are recommended for the most "Limited Official Use" to which it is possible to limit them.

Nouns and Phrases

Verb Forms

image	to play in low key
posture	to stem from
presence	to structure
mystique	to restructure
confrontation	to onload
situation	to offload
structure	to move forward
infrastructure	to kick off (a political campaign, program)
dialogue	
on balance	to trigger
political infighting	to step up
dichotomy	to add a new dimension
thrust (of an argument)	to back-stop
take-off stage (a program or economy)	

Finally, the editors might to advantage dispense with the term "the reader" when defending their changes during confrontations with analysts. The implication of this word in the singular--an audience of only one--is wilting of the analyst's posture and has an adverse impact on the projection of his image. Besides, analysts always speak of editors in the plural, because there always seem to be several echelons. Since the analyst is guaranteed at least so many readers, the plural form--on balance--would appear to be good usage in the editorial dialogue.

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