

More Against Footnotes

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Dear Sirs:

Mr. Alexander does not consider the different circumstances that apply to intelligence analysis and research in the academic world. First, intelligence analysis is a team activity. The analyst commonly does his work under the professional supervision of a section or branch chief; he coordinates his manuscript with other specialists; and the results are reviewed by an editor who is, in my experience, a professional in his own right. Mr. Alexander omits the first two and deprecates the last of these mechanisms most unjustifiably. This team effort constitutes a properly rigorous apparatus for maintaining quality control. Admittedly, it doesn't always do what it should, but then neither do footnotes. If a report is of doubtful quality, it is the competency of staff rather than the adequacy of apparatus that we need worry about.

A second difference is that most finished intelligence reports are directed at a non-specialist. Footnotes documenting sources have constituted an apparatus by which one scholar might convince another of his views despite separation in space or time; papers in scholarly journals may thus effectively address themselves to distant scholars. Such scholarly communication is not, however, the purpose of most intelligence reports. To document definitive intelligence statements like the NIS and NIE would beg the question that led to their preparation. We do use footnotes in some intelligence research designed mainly to increase the body of knowledge available to analysts. These are for the convenience and edification of other specialists, who are the primary end users. But finished intelligence is not issued so that the recipient, who has his own work to do, can check the work that has gone into it. Having stated his requirement, he must have faith enough in the system to accept what he gets.

R. T. Allan, Jr.

Dear Sirs:

The major substantive shortcoming of Mr. Alexander's article is, paradoxically, a lack of documentation-any evidence, that is, that a lack of footnotes has caused "an undesired but nevertheless real degradation of the intelligence effort." His rhetorical questions give the reader no basis for believing that the final intelligence products would have been better if footnoted.

The analogy with other professions may be misleading. A scholar writes for colleagues equally versed in the field of his particular study, who can and will double-check his sources, and whose disagreements may bring about a closer approximation to truth. The intelligence analyst, on the contrary, writes not laterally, to his colleagues, but vertically, to his superiors and ultimately to the policy makers- persons whose elevation in the intelligence structure is inversely proportional to their time or inclination to check sources.

The footnote requirement might indeed preclude top-of-the-head analysis. But the greatest asset of many skilled analysts is their own undocumentable experience. One immersed in Soviet propaganda can say authoritatively that never before has some particular line appeared, but he would be hard pressed to document his statement, based as it is only on his acquired sensitivity. If one is to trust our system at all, one must believe that most such undocumentable interpretations are well based, and that any advantages of source citation would not justify the cost.

David McConnaughey

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