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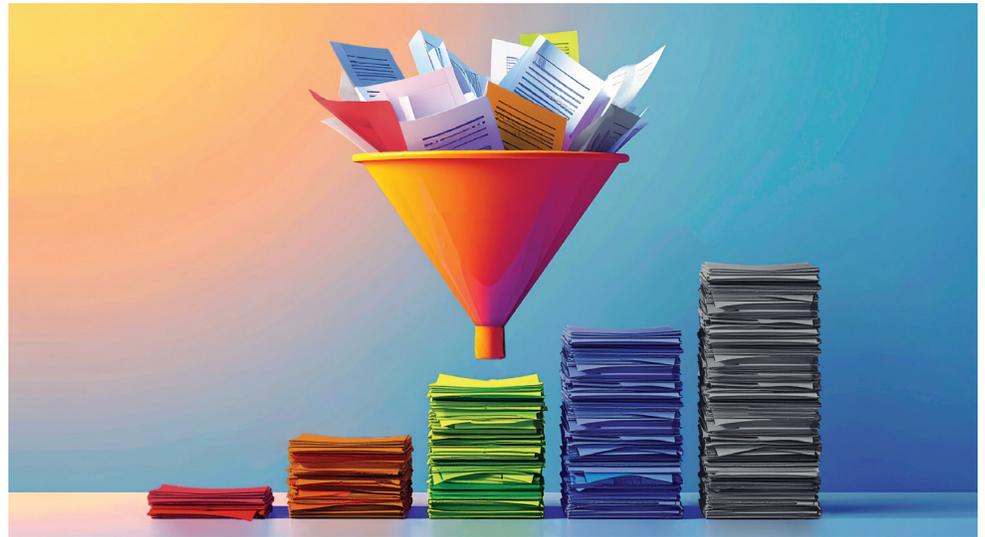
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Consuming Intelligence in the Information-Sharing Environment

Matthew Tompkins

Renewed focus on US homeland security is revitalizing expectations for the Intelligence Community (IC) to share information with domestic partners. As consuming organizations proliferate, including in state and local law enforcement agencies and governments, and in the private sector, this *Research Short* explores the demands and best practices that differentiate analysts in these organizations from those in the IC: focus on particular customer needs; actively seek information in an ecosystem primed for passive receipt; give dual primacy to public and classified material; integrate analysis within customer decisionmaking; and carefully curate actionable material. To fully realize the value of information sharing, intelligence-consuming analysts specialized in their subfield's unique requirements are essential.

## Diversified New Intelligence Customers With Unique Needs

The "Information Sharing Environment" (ISE) that emerged from the post-9/11 requirements to better share intelligence with external partners[1] is poised to further expand, given today's renewed expectations to strengthen US homeland security (Fig. 1). The earliest iteration of the ISE, with sector-focused Information Sharing and Analysis Centers (ISACs)[2] and regional Fusion Centers,[3] has continued growing with new intelligence programs in large police departments,[4] major corporations,[5] and state, local, tribal, and territorial (SLTT) agencies.[6] Lessons from early ISE efforts can inform both the IC and its increasingly varied customer set on best practices for fostering information-sharing relationships to meet multiple missions.

The intelligence consumers being supported within these organizations are typically far less accustomed to receiving, integrating, and employing intelligence than traditional consumers. Police chiefs, chief executive officers, or the heads of Federal agencies outside traditional national security roles are much less likely to have experience using estimative intelligence in support of their decisionmaking. Consumers in ISE organizations use IC-shared intelligence to mitigate potential disruptions to missions and functions that are not themselves inherently intelligence-driven, from providing essential services to selling products. A scholar with Denmark's National Police College found that organizations engaged in tasks distinct from the traditional intelligence consumer's role of confronting state adversaries cannot simply employ intelligence in the same manner.[7] This fundamentally different set of consumers means that intelligence analysts who work within ISE organizations must both convey intelligence content and advise their organizations' decisionmakers on how to integrate it with other processes and considerations.

> "There is no phase of the intelligence business which is more important than the proper relationship between intelligence itself and the people who use its products. Oddly enough, this relationship, which one would expect to establish itself automatically, does not do this. It is established as a result of a great deal of conscious effort."
>
> – Sherman Kent, *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy* (Princeton University Press, 1949), 180

Figure 1. The Information-Sharing Environment
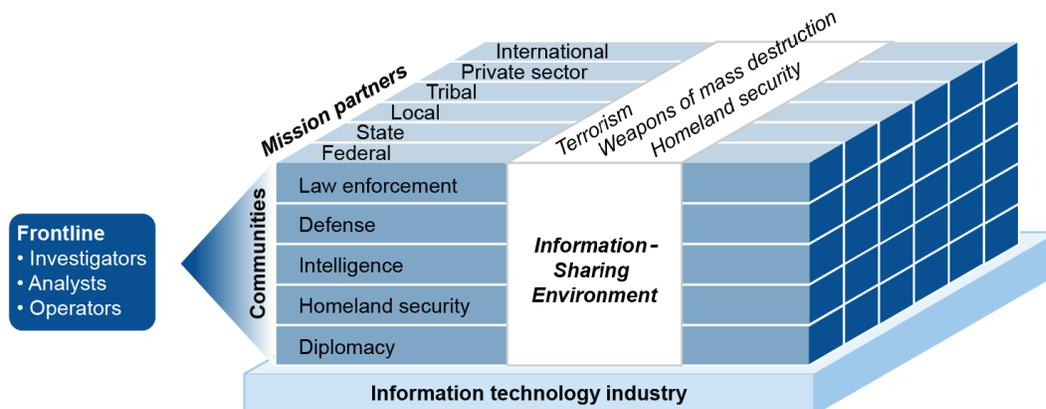
Source: Government Accountability Office, *Counterterrorism: Action Needed to Further Develop the Information-Sharing Environment* (June 2023), https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-105310.

As ISE organizations' needs mature, the responsibilities of intelligence analysts within them will continue to evolve beyond their early role of largely subscribing to IC partners' unclassified distribution lists and forwarding the results to their own internal distribution lists. These analysts are increasingly expected to provide value-added analytic services,[8] but without the authorities or capabilities of Title 50 or Title 10 agencies, their processes and resources are more constrained. The need for differentiated professionalization has already been widely identified for private sector intelligence analysts.[9] The same need exists for analysts in Federal Intelligence Coordination Offices (FICOs),[10] Fusion Centers, ISACs, and SLTT agencies, who have requirements, limitations, and capabilities more comparable to their ISE colleagues in the private sector than to their counterparts in IC and defense agencies.

Special Considerations for Consumption Intelligence

To start the conversation about how to mature analytic support for nontraditional consumers in the ISE as a specialized discipline, the following proposed recommendations and best practices apply general analytic tradecraft to the specific task of supporting ISE consumers. These proposals are meant to encourage dialogue, but they also illustrate the through-lines that connect intelligence analysts across ISE organizations as disparate as major corporations, police departments, and ISACs, while simultaneously differentiating them from their peers in the IC.

With respect to the IC, analysts working in the ISE are ultimately intelligence *consumers* undertaking intelligence work that is a component of their organization's decisionmaking. For brevity, this *Short* will use the shorthand "consumption intelligence" to refer to this work.

Know Your Customer

Specialized consumption analysts have a unique opportunity to add value by specifically targeting their efforts to each customers' distinct needs and limitations. Unlike most IC analysts, ISE analysts have recurring access to their customers,[11] and can usually identify who the intelligence is supporting. This allows them to explicitly articulate for each customer how material pertains to their existing workflows and decisionmaking processes, whether that customer is:

- A corporate board determining long-term strategic investments in security or weighing risk-management decisions.

- Subject matter experts in a Federal agency or ISAC providing guidance or standards to secure their infrastructure sector.

- The leaders of local police departments trying to understand how general reporting or analysis on a national threat applies specifically to their respective cities and towns.

- Cyber or physical security staff, who need timely and actionable warnings of threat activity.

Of course, within most organizations, more than just one class of consumer exists. Consumption intelligence analysts might be engaged with segments of their audience who among them have

needs that are both strategic and tactical, specialized and generalist, cyber and physical, long- and short-term, or expert and novice. In practice, that may necessitate highly varied production and dissemination, where each distinct internal audience receives different material or different versions of the same material. It may mean sharing general analysis, but doing so in a manner that focuses exclusively on the readers' priorities by cherry-picking particular points or focusing on an otherwise tangential portion in the source analysis. Refined knowledge of how customers engage with the intelligence material they receive can enable analysts to provide content that is tailored and targeted to be relevant and actionable.

Actively Seek Information

Collection for a consumption intelligence analyst within the ISE is constrained compared to the opportunity that IC analysts have, at an institutional level, to task specific collection in response to intelligence questions. Although ISE organizations can gather information from their security apparatus—from guards to cameras to cybersecurity appliances—they cannot pass source-directed requirements to IC intelligence collectors or task new imagery collection to meet their specific needs. Consumption analysts are mostly limited to the information streams made available to them, including official information (much of it unclassified), publicly available information, and an array of commercial sources.

This dependency makes it critical that consumption analysts target the information they need, rather than make do with what is easiest to access or use. From cyber reporting to strategic political analysis, the robust Federal information-sharing apparatus and mature ecosystem of vendors regularly produce material that is readable, relatively easy to access, and abundant. But that is often the information under the streetlight.[12]

"Streetlight" information is not problematic per se—analysts may just be lucky that is where the keys are—but often it relates only broadly to intelligence needs without actually informing decisionmaking. Consumption analysts need to make that distinction, and then work to identify the less typical alternatives that may be more difficult to access, use, or assess but provide information that is more actionable for that analyst's ISE organization. For example:

THE STREETLIGHT FALLACY

People tend to look for things where looking is easier, rather than where finding is more likely. This logical fallacy gets its name from a parable about a police officer who finds a drunk crawling around under a streetlight:

"What are you doing?"

"I'm looking for my keys."

"Where did you drop them?"

"I have no idea."

"Why are you crawling around over here?"

"This is where the light is."

- Although IC analysis of extremists' long-term strategic intent has value, reporting from a community awareness group may be more informative on the current threat posed in a specific region or sector.

- Unclassified Federal reporting can support near-term cyber threat detection and response, but think-tank analysis or academic research may be more relevant for long-term cyber security decisions, such as developing preventive countermeasures.

Give Dual Primacy to Publicly Available Information and Classified Material

Two divergent imperatives must be balanced: ISE consumers' demands for unclassified, publicly available material and consumption analysts' unique added value of reviewing classified material on behalf of the organization. A confluence of circumstances and requirements gives unclassified material primacy in ISE organizations. Intelligence-informed actions by police departments and other SLTT agencies may invite pushback or scrutiny, so public buy-in can be critical to their effectiveness. Regulatory decisions, such as cybersecurity standards, may be challenged in courts or subject to other review processes, so making all relevant supporting information publicly available is essential to implementation.[13] This means the strongest demand signal from consumers is for mostly unclassified materials.

Yet the constraint of mostly uncleared staff in ISE organizations also makes it imperative that consumption analysts focus on reviewing classified materials. With few—or sometimes no—decisionmakers routinely accessing classified materials, only the analysts are in a position to identify relevant material and flag it for appropriate next steps. The responsibility of sifting through classified material, which typically can be shared with others in an ISE organization only by exception and with great effort, requires consumption analysts to know their consumers well enough to assess when that effort is justified. Key questions to consider are:

- Does the new material change the established analytic line on the subject?

- Does it add to or deviate from unclassified reporting or analysis in a manner that is substantively relevant for the ISE customers?

- Will it provide some sort of alert or warning that is potentially actionable or urgent for the ISE customers?

This dynamic also necessitates that ISE analysts possess expertise in the methods used to make classified information available, including one-time read-ins, information downgrades, tear-line requests, and recommending new individuals or teams to receive security clearances. Although these mechanisms are governed by clear policies and rules, employing them without overstepping can be daunting for IC analysts accustomed to the safety net of engaging with cleared individuals in Sensitive Compartmented Information Facilities. For consumption analysts, stepping back and forth over the line between classified material and uncleared audiences is a central task, and they need not only the training and tools, but also IC support to do so expertly and with confidence.

Beyond the BLUF: Engage with Policy Priorities

A whole generation of IC analysts has matured under the standards established by Intelligence Community Directive 203 *(Analytic Standards),* including a requirement for unbiased analysis that is independent from customer priorities such as political considerations or preferred courses of action.[14] Analysts working in ISE organizations, however, may find themselves in positions where their independence from practical and political considerations needs to be moderated. Uniquely among intelligence professionals, consumption analysts are integrated into intelligence consumers'

decisionmaking, and are called upon to assist their customers with integrating intelligence within the context of existing priorities, concerns, or limitations.

Work in that murky environment must be especially diligent and transparent in its processes and reasoning. Structured analytic techniques that focus on reframing analysis or challenging conclusions—such as formal red-teaming and premortem exercises—are essential to keeping bias out of analysis that takes other decisionmaking factors into consideration. Customers who are less experienced with using intelligence require more than just the bottom line up front (BLUF); consumption analysts need to also answer the question "why are we showing you this?" in a manner that explicitly articulates how the intelligence supports or refutes other considerations in an ISE organization's decisionmaking.

> The FICO at the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission has socialized WAWSYT? (acronym for "why are we showing you this?") within the agency to draw consumers' eyes to not just the bottom line, but also to what they can do with the shared information.

Curate Material

Rather than the conventional signal and noise problem addressed by filtering material to avoid information overload, the challenge for consumption analysts supporting ISE organizations is actually more of a signal and signal problem: separating the routine relevant information that merits general awareness from the notable intelligence that can be actionable for decisionmaking. Mature intelligence consumers—such as battlefield commanders and national security policymakers—have intelligence-driven decisionmaking processes that can incorporate routine relevant materials. Consumption analysts work in organizations where the integration of intelligence alongside other decisionmaking factors is more atomized—appended to a process that is not otherwise intelligence-driven. As a result, they need mechanisms both for employing routine information to establish a base of knowledge and for spotlighting actionable material when it has particular relevance to a decision.

An effective ISE intelligence program must ingest all of the information that has the potential to be relevant, catalog and make routine items passively available to cultivate long-term familiarity, and actively disseminate only the items that have the potential to be useful to the targeted audience at a timely moment. Consumption intelligence analysis is not about collection or production or even dissemination; it is about curation. The analysts' role is to share what needs sharing with their ISE organizations, *and* to filter what needs filtering.

Implications for the IC: Supporting Analysts Specializing in Two Intelligence Cycles of Consumption Intelligence

Consumption intelligence analysts engage in two distinct but intersecting intelligence cycles (Fig. 2). Within their ISE organizations, they manage a full lifecycle of identifying their customers' needs and collecting, synthesizing, and disseminating information in a manner useful for their audience. With the IC, they engage on behalf of their ISE organizations, consuming disseminated materials and providing feedback to support further planning.

Looking ahead to a growing cohort of consumption analysts, as today's renewed focus on US homeland security expands the ISE, a professional body of literature, tools, and best practices, including those outlined in the previous section, could refine the work that these analysts do in support of both intelligence cycles. Just as supervisory analysts or collection managers or imagery analysts benefit from specialized tools and training within specialized professional communities, fruitful stewardship of consumption intelligence as a discipline can arm these analysts to do so with maximum effectiveness.

Figure 2. Two Intelligence Cycles of Consumption Intelligence
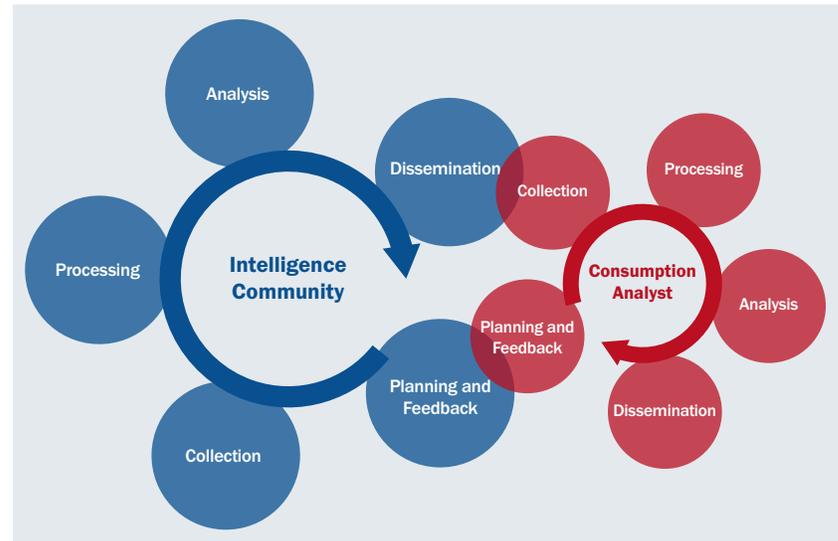
Source: Author's rendition.

This *Research Short* aims to start a conversation about building this discipline as a subfield of intelligence analysis. Although a throughline of common needs, limitations, and practices exists among ISE organizations' consumption analysts, their dispersal across FICOs, Fusion Centers, ISACs, SLTT agencies, and corporations complicates sharing lessons learned. The IC should facilitate development of this ecosystem: the intelligence-sharing enterprise that has emerged in the past two decades has done so with the presumption of value in such sharing. If that value is to be fully realized, the beneficiary organizations of intelligence sharing need consumption analysts trained and expert in the unique processes and demands of their subfields.

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If you have comments, questions, or suggestions for a *Research Short* topic or article, please contact the NI Press team at: **NIU_NIPress@niu.odni.gov**.

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