Benchmarking Best Practices: A Means To Improve Analytic Rigor and Excellence?

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As the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) grades analytic products for rigor and excellence, it also collects and shares best practices in the use of the IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards. The wider IC, however, does not systematically share the best practices developed by its use of the standards to guide analysis processes and grow analysts’ proficiency, which hinders analytic quality. This Research Short cites Benchmarking Theory, a business improvement framework for determining transferability of potential best practices, to introduce one agency’s potential example best practice to improve analytic tradecraft. Then, it seeks additional exemplars that could be collected and shared across the IC.
Twenty years ago, Congress passed the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act (IRTPA). The law contained provisions to improve the rigor and excellence of US analytic intelligence products, in the wake of the 9/11 attack and the IC assessment that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.\(^1\) The Act created ODNI and initially codified four IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards. Intelligence Community Directive (ICD) 203, *Analytic Standards*, published in 2007 and updated in 2015, increased the number of standards to eight and then, nine.\(^2\) Although numbered, none were given a formal title and are known colloquially by their one-word nomenclature,\(^3\) listed in Table 1.

**Table 1. The IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards\(^4\)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Nomenclature</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>SOURCING</td>
<td>Properly describes quality and credibility of underlying sources, data, and methodology.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>UNCERTAINTY</td>
<td>Properly expresses and explains uncertainties associated with major analytic judgments.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>DISTINGUISHING</td>
<td>Properly distinguishes between underlying intelligence information and analysts’ assumptions and judgments.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>ALTERNATIVES</td>
<td>Incorporates analysis of alternatives.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>RELEVANCE</td>
<td>Demonstrates customer relevance and addresses implications.</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>LOGIC</td>
<td>Uses clear and logical argumentation.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>CONSISTENCY</td>
<td>Explains changes to or consistency of analytic judgments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>ACCURACY</td>
<td>Makes accurate judgments and assessments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>VISUAL</td>
<td>Incorporates effective visual information where appropriate.</td>
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**Purposes of the IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards**

The primary purpose of the IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards is to govern the rigor and excellence of analytic production across the IC. A critical assessment of IRTPA and ICD 203 reveals that this core purpose parses into three interrelated subpurposes:\(^5\),\(^6\),\(^7\)

- To grade analytic products, using a four-point scale for each standard to assess a sample of each producing IC agency’s analytic intelligence reports.\(^8\)
- To guide analysis processes; to improve how analysis happens, and how it is conveyed.
- To grow analysts’ proficiency, through initial and career-spanning tradecraft training.

IRTPA directed the new Director of National Intelligence to grade intelligence products against the IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards, specifically tasking a new individual or entity to “perform, on a regular basis, detailed reviews of finished intelligence products or other analytic products.” ODNI would then “submit to the Congressional intelligence committees, the heads of the relevant
elements of the Intelligence Community, and the heads of analytic training departments a report containing a description, and the associated findings, of each review.”

The law also suggested that ODNI use its critical reviews for continuous improvement purposes. By grading products, best practices could be identified to guide improvements in analytic tradecraft processes and grow analysts’ proficiency through informed training curriculum development. The identification and flow of best practices among the grading, guiding, and growing subpurposes of the IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards are depicted in Fig. 1.

Over time, application of these nine standards has steadily improved analytic rigor and excellence, as assessed by ODNI and agency evaluators against the four-point rubric of the standards. Some scholars argue that incremental improvements at the margins of analytic transformation, however, may not be sufficient for the increasingly complex nature of a post-pandemic world order.

Others contend that the elementary nature of the IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards limits their contribution to effective analysis—however that is defined—and they malign their use in post-publication evaluations as merely a means to measure the outputs of an obsolete 20th century production-line view of the analytic process.

Nonetheless, champions and many critics generally agree that the standards enshrined in ICD 203 offer the IC a better solution toward improving tradecraft than what previously existed. Their use is a necessary, if insufficient, condition for producing quality intelligence analysis—one that raises the collective floor, if not the shared ceiling.

Amid IRTPA’s various prescriptions to improve analytic quality is a suggestion—not a direction—that ODNI “may draft lessons learned, identify best practices, or make recommendations for improvement to the analytic tradecraft employed in the production of the reviewed product or products.” ODNI’s Analytic Integrity and Standards (AIS) Division is wholly meeting the intent of this element of the law. Each year, as part of its grading process, it publishes exemplary products and highlights the tradecraft practices that contributed to their standard-setting scores. Further, in 2010 the office debuted a classified compendium of best practices, with a for-official-use-only version published in 2015 for the widest dissemination. Meanwhile, it printed and distributed tens of thousands of laminated lanyard cards listing the standards for ready reference by analysts in its efforts to guide analytic processes and grow analytic proficiency.
But can more be done to improve analytic tradecraft? Are there additional means of collecting and sharing best practices from one work role or agency to others to improve the rigor and excellence of analytic intelligence reporting? Theoretically, the answer to these not-so-rhetorical questions is likely yes. Despite ODNI’s efforts to pass on lessons learned from its grading function, the IC is missing a clear opportunity to do more to gather and share IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards’ best practices. A more comprehensive, dynamic, and fruitful model of best practice exchange would facilitate collecting and sharing best practices from and among all three subpurposes, toward increased continuous improvement, as shown in Fig. 2.

**Benchmarking Theory’s Potential To Improve IC Analysis**

Invigorating this more comprehensive model can be done by drawing on the concept of benchmarking, which the literature on business operations and process improvement highlights as a compelling mechanism for finding and sharing potential best practices. Once identified, these best practices can be adopted by IC organizations and agencies.

The literature identifies nearly 50 definitions of benchmarking—most of which align in their foundational main ideas but diverge with respect to scope, factors, mechanisms, and results. The following definition synthesizes the key concepts from the leading variations:

**Benchmarking:** To successfully adopt, with or without adaptation, a potential best practice of another for the purpose of improving performance and outcomes.

Although the concept has existed since at least the early 20th century, benchmarking as now understood and practiced did not come into its own until the late 1970s when Robert C. Camp studied the operations of other manufacturers to find ways to improve the Xerox Corporation’s processes and reduce its costs. Benchmarking blossomed through the early 2000s as a so-called “management fashion” and ranked among the top-five management tools used from 1993 to 2017, according to Bain & Company surveys of thousands of international businesses.

Despite benchmarking’s enduring relevance, only one unifying theory for the concept has emerged to date. Scholars attribute the lack of theory-making to the pragmatic nature of benchmarking itself—with researchers, consultants, and practitioners instead focused on advancing the concept by evolving and applying its multiple frameworks and methodologies. In 2011,
John Moriarty ultimately overcame academia's reticence with his aptly named Benchmarking Theory, paraphrased as:

**Benchmarking Theory:** Benchmarking is successful when an Aspirant organization achieves improved bottom-line outcomes toward its continued existence as a result of adopting a best practice of an Exemplar organization. Notwithstanding the role of chance, benchmarking is more likely to succeed to the extent that the Aspirant can align its practice, purpose for that practice, relevant organizational rules and properties, and other management practices to the best practice and those better factors of the Exemplar.

In Moriarty’s theory, the Aspirant is an underperforming organization that aspires to improve by adopting a better practice from an Exemplar organization. According to Moriarty, all organizations exist and operate for a singular existential reason: to survive. All practices are deemed to be causal in nature, driven by this survival instinct. Expressed mathematically as follows:

Survival cause + a given practice + an element of chance = an effect.

The presence of chance in the formula accounts for the variation often observed in an otherwise standardized process—the sort of disruptive and inefficient variance that Six-Sigma and other process-improvement methodologies aim to minimize.\(^{23}\)

According to the theory, success requires that the Aspirant attain improved welfare as a result of benchmarking a best practice of an Exemplar. The likelihood of success is conditioned on the extent that the Aspirant organization matches the Exemplar organization in terms of its:

- Governing laws, rules, and policies over the best practice,
- Operating conditions or properties, and
- In some instances: a certain *je ne sais quoi* of the Exemplar organization’s better managerial or cultural aspects that contribute to its better results.\(^{24}^{*}\)

With respect to the Exemplar’s practice, the literature disagrees on whether the concept is a “best” or, merely, a “better” practice. Moriarty contends that in nearly all instances, certain knowledge of what is “best” is unavailable; thus, all that can be assured is “better.”\(^{25}\) Despite this distinction, the literature overwhelmingly uses the best-practice term to describe all varieties of *those better activities that produce better results in better-performing organizations.*\(^{26}\)

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* This is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. Moriarty includes it in his Benchmarking Theory to account for the adoption of less-tangible best practices of an Exemplar organization that are, nonetheless, powerful drivers of improvement. Such business practices are often accounted for in business quality improvement programs such as the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program or ISO 9000.
Finding Potential IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards Best Practices To Share

The applicability and utility of the IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards spans the spectrum of the analytic process, from initial conceptualization through production to post-publication evaluation. Within analytic production, a Venn diagram would illustrate the standards operating at the intersection of analysis proper and the conveyance of that analysis. Accordingly, this Short posits that best practices can—and should—be collected more broadly: from ODNI-evaluated exemplar products, as well as from all other applied uses of the standards from IC agencies that produce analytic intelligence products.

Indeed, through his work in analytic production support, the author discovered a half-dozen likely best practices. Extrapolating from this anecdotal evidence, the notion of additional yet-to-be-benchmarked best practices is further supported by his firsthand experience with the editorial team at the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) that developed a potential best practice use of the IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards.

NGA Editor Tagging

The NGA team developed a potential IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards best practice during an effort to quantify the impact text editors had on analytic quality. First, the team determined that tagging edits with a label corresponding to one of the IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards would enable the team to quantify and sort them by tradecraft standard. This collected data could then be compared to similar data drawn from the intelligence products graded by AIS evaluators. To do this comparison, the editors created a job aid and method for using it to apply a tag to an edit. The team developed an ad hoc benchmarking process that modified the ODNI evaluation rubric to create a checklist-based tool that guided editors in framing text edits through the lens of the IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards.

A potentially more significant “aha moment” occurred after the study concluded, when the NGA team assessed that if editors were to use this tool to tag all edits that correspond with one of the IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards, it could potentially influence analysts to adhere more closely to the standards. Moreover, analysts might be more apt to accept edits clearly aligned to rigorous objective criteria. Equally important, this feedback to analysts would be used to guide versus grade the rigor and excellence of their analysis—all toward better-quality analytic intelligence products.

A Call To Action: What Are the (Other) Potential IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards Best Practices?

To improve the rigor and excellence of IC analytic tradecraft and US intelligence reports and advance the theoretical and practical aspects of benchmarking, the author is researching the overarching question:

What are the IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards’ potential best practices for benchmarking?
One method to answer that questions is to solicit, collect, assess, and share potential best practices from those who use the IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards—primarily IC officers involved in analysis and analytic production, review, and tradecraft training.

Any reader with a potential IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards best practice is encouraged to contact the author at jeffrey.m.bishop@nga.mil with information about the practice and how it contributes to improved analytic rigor and excellence. A selection of these best practices will be documented and published as a compendium for possible benchmarking by other IC agencies.

Postscript: Twenty years after their debut, one of the most compelling criticisms of the IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards is that they do not do nearly enough to address those analytic reforms most needed by the IC. But has their full potential been achieved—or even sought? This Research Short argues that the impact of the IC Analytic Tradecraft Standards has been limited to the extent that the community has neglected to collect and share those best practices that surely exist across agencies. If the IC is to continuously improve the rigor and excellence of its analytic tradecraft and analytic intelligence reporting during the next 20 years, it must collect and share all of these best practices. Including yours.

Jeffrey M. Bishop is a research fellow at NIU on detail from NGA; this Research Short draws on his ongoing NIU research. He also leads the Missouri National Guard Joint Plans and Exercises Directorate (J5/7) as an Air National Guard officer. This article is part of the NIU Office of Research and Engagement’s IRTPA at 20 effort.

If you have comments, questions, or suggestions for a Research Short topic or article, please contact the NIU Office of Research and Engagement at: NIPress@niu.odni.gov.
Endnotes

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