



## Are the Analytic Tradecraft Standards Hurting as Much as Helping?

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*Despite the 9/11 and WMD Commissions' findings that the IC lacked both standards and imagination, the IC has largely given itself a pass on the need to increase its efforts regarding the latter. Moreover, the analytic tradecraft standards—at least as applied—are hindering the IC from being more imaginative.*

It is now IC gospel that the analytic tradecraft standards, promulgated in ICD 203, are good.<sup>1</sup> Analysts carry cards listing them, posters and signs abound proclaiming them, a lot of training focuses on them, products are evaluated against them, and leadership worries about them. Indeed, good tradecraft—and by extension good intelligence—is now all too readily conflated with them.

But what if the tradecraft standards are not only helping but also actually hurting us? What if they are essentially echoes of an industrial—assembly-line—past that are preventing us from facing up to an information-age future? What if they are fundamentally so “small” that they prevent us from thinking “big”? What if we have simply grabbed the low-hanging fruit (that might make us *good*) at the expense of being truly imaginative as well (i.e., *great*)? (As an interesting contextual aside, it is worth noting that these questions are not unique to the IC but rather are relevant to almost all industrial-age legacy organizations, perhaps most notably public schools with their enduring emphasis on standardized testing.)

Analytic Tradecraft Standards	
1.	Properly describes quality and credibility of underlying sources, data, and methodologies.
2.	Properly expresses and explains uncertainties associated with major analytic judgments.
3.	Properly distinguishes between underlying intelligence information and analysts' assumptions and judgments.
4.	Incorporates analysis of alternatives.
5.	Demonstrates customer relevance and addresses implications.
6.	Uses clear and logical argumentation.
7.	Explains change to or consistency of analytic judgments.
8.	Makes accurate judgments or assessments.
9.	Incorporates effective visual information where appropriate.

Before exploring these questions, let's first give the tradecraft standards their due. They have taken what was too often an excessively craft-like approach to analysis (on-the-job training, individualistic mentoring, uniqueness by agency, etc.) and given it a fundamental, across-the-board structure. Indeed, I have often heard it expressed—accurately, I think—that the standards provide a baseline or foundation upon which the IC can build.<sup>2</sup>



But what if we never really build on that foundation? What if, instead, the tradecraft standards too often become the be-all, end-all of what we call analytic quality?

Of course, these should not even be questions. Although it is true that both the 9/11 Commission<sup>3</sup> and WMD Commission<sup>4</sup> reports found a lack of standards as part of the problem, both reports also clearly identified a lack of imagination as a significant failure. Indeed, the 9/11 Commission actually emphasized the latter.

Given that, why has the IC placed so much emphasis on standards and seemingly so little on imagination? Moreover, how/why do the standards themselves—at least as implemented—actually hinder the IC from being more imaginative/creative?

### **Six Contributing Factors**

First, and most importantly, the IC misunderstood—and continues to misunderstand—the importance of imagination/creativity in modern intelligence. There seems to be an enduring lack of appreciation for how the increasingly complex/interconnected security environment demands new, more creative ways of thinking. Complex systems are defined as much, if not more, by the connections between the components as by the components themselves. As such, complex systems cannot be understood merely by analysis, which emphasizes reductionism or breaking things down. Rather, such systems demand synthetic—that is to say, creative—perspectives whereby the aperture is much more open. A much greater emphasis on imaginative methods (e.g., red-teaming, simulation, or gaming) is needed to achieve such a holistic perspective—to see the big picture.<sup>5</sup>

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Second, this analytic mindset is abetted and reinforced by a culture that places collection—often classified—at the center of what it does. This is a legacy of our formative experience with the USSR, which, as a closed system, was first and foremost a collection problem. However, in today's open and interconnected world, the fundamental problem is less one of how to get the information—we are drowning in it—than of how to make sense of so much information. It is a cognitive problem, not a collection problem, and as such it can only be addressed by creative thinking. Put differently, you cannot collect your way to creativity.

Third, imagination is much harder to codify and/or formularize than standards. (Not to mention train, teach, and measure.) Fundamentally, the IC likes codes and formulas—rules. And creativity is, by one definition, about “breaking the rules.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, there is fundamental antagonism between standards and creativity, and the IC seems—not surprisingly—to have gone largely for the one that conforms with its predilections.

However, one way the IC tried to bridge this fissure—so as to not completely ignore the commissions' call for more imagination—was to incorporate creativity/imagination into the standards. Hence, standard 4 is arguably an attempt at “standardizing creativity.” It is often referred to within the analytic community as the “creativity standard.” But just as common sense is not common, creativity cannot—again, by definition—be standardized.

Fourth, just as there is a tension between standards and creativity, there is also a tension within the standards themselves between standard 4 and some of the other standards. For example, the simple fact that creative thought is often highly speculative and nonlinear tends to put standard 4 in tension with standards 1 and 6. Another example might be seen in the tension between standards 4 and 8 because creativity requires a high tolerance for getting it wrong or, at least, not precisely right. If the IC is going to demand accuracy—that it be

“right”—then the intelligence produced is unlikely to stretch and explore possibilities that can turn out to be wrong. In addition, standard 9, as written, implemented, and evaluated, promotes visualization exclusively in terms of the presentation of a finished product. However, since visualization is also a vital creative/imaginative thinking tool, perhaps the standard ought to reflect this other usage as well.

Fifth, the IC is a production-driven community. Like most organizations whose formative experience took place in the industrial age, it is focused on output (rather than outcome or impact) and uses the standards as both a replicable formula for efficiency and a form of quality control. This emphasis on output aligns well with standards and thereby contributes to a sort of assembly-line approach to analysis—one that is more concerned with pumping out a consistent product than with being in the business of uniquely imparting distinct knowledge or insight.

Sixth (and to come full-circle with the first point in this list regarding recognition of the problem) is a point about time. I have often heard it said that even if the IC does need to be more creative, it can and must wait until it gets its foundation in place via the standards. This is misguided. The explosion of strategic complexity, again interconnectedness, that the IC must

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cope with cannot wait. It is a phenomenon that has been exponentially increasing for over 25 years. It took off with the opening of China and the collapse of the USSR and continues to be pushed along by an ever accelerating information technology revolution. In other words, the IC is already behind the curve, and both 9/11 and the Iraq WMD issue were merely the first major wake-up calls of this new strategic environment.

### **Finding a Better Balance Between Standards and Creativity**

Undoubtedly, there are other factors in play as well as the six I have outlined, but the point here (in a Research Short) is not to be exhaustive. Rather, it is to open for discussion and debate whether the IC, to be truly relevant in a complex world, must now shake off some of the industrial age, assembly-line characteristics that so fundamentally shape it. The IC must come to accept that imagination is not just a “nice-to-do” that can be put on the back burner or perhaps handed off to a few “creative” organizations (e.g., red cells, etc.) so that most analysts can keep churning on “the line.” It must recognize that imagination is fundamental to understanding this new, ever more complex world. The IC must think about how to reconceive the standards and/or their implementation so as to ensure they do not hinder imagination and thereby relegate the IC to being another in a long line of organizations (think Kodak, Blockbuster, etc.) that were unable to make the leap from the industrial to the information age.

To end then, perhaps it is worth considering the above challenges as they manifested themselves in a discussion that I recently had with a senior DoD policymaker (and former senior intelligence officer) who wanted to discuss—lament might be a better term—the intelligence support she was receiving. (The discussion also went a long way toward discrediting another commonly heard IC argument against imaginative analysis—that there is no significant demand signal from policymakers.) The essence of this policymaker’s remarks was that while most of the steady stream of analysis she was receiving was probably “right,” it rarely pushed the boundaries of what was possible, wasn’t particularly insightful, and usually only went as far as the collection permitted. Most of the analyses seemed to be little more than simple linear story lines and/or extrapolations that were usually

just confirmatory of the conventional or consensus opinion. In contrast, she said she wanted much more intelligence that stretched her conceptions and perceptions, and caused her to stop and say “hmmmm...I hadn’t thought about it playing out in that way.”<sup>7</sup>

In retrospect, she was pointing her finger right at the issue: most of the analytic production she was referring to had first and foremost strived to meet the standards.

And that, of course, was—and is—the problem.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Intelligence Community Directive 203: Analytic Standards*, January 2, 2015, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICD/ICD%20203%20Analytic%20Standards.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, “DIA Director for Analysis Briefs Congress on Tradecraft,” March 7, 2017, <http://www.dia.mil/News/Articles/Article/1104959/dia-director-for-analysis-briefs-congress-on-tradecraft/>.

<sup>3</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, <https://9-11commission.gov/report/>.

<sup>4</sup> *Unclassified Version of the Report of the Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction*, March 31, 2005, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GPO-WMD>.

<sup>5</sup> Josh Kerbel, “The U.S. Intelligence Community’s Creativity Challenge,” *National Interest*, October 13, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-us-intelligence-communitys-creativity-challenge-11451>.

<sup>6</sup> Andrea Kuszewski, “Creative Disobedience: How, When and Why To Break the Rules,” March 1, 2014, <http://andreakuszewski.com/bil-2014-creative-disobedience/>.

<sup>7</sup> Discussion with Senior DoD/OSD policymaker, October 7, 2016.