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Information Relevance in Understanding the Security Environment

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Abstract: Objective: This paper explores mechanisms regarding information relevance. **Prior work:** Information relevance is obviously important in analysis, yet not adequately addressed theoretically. **Approach**: Logical inquiery in multidisciplinary observation of intelligence process. **Results:** Starting with collection, selecting the most useful information, considering its various qualities, is crucial for valuable intelligence products. Information relevance reflects the connection between information and the observing entity, context, time or debate. Information relevance is part of the process of replacing reality with a simplified model; it helps building indicators and identifies indications along various courses of action. In a systemic view, relevance reflects information value regarding all components of the security environment: actors, interactions and objective conditions. Same as value, information relevance shows the properties of perishability and latency, which shape the utility of each piece of information for varius types of intelligence products. **Implications:** Clarifications regarding relevance can be used in guiding analytical activities such as Indications and Warnings, establishing and managing assumptions, information management, collation, source credibility assessment. Obviously, AI can help optimizing analyst work of estimating and exploiting information relevance. **Value:** This paper sets directions for further studies regarding information relevance, including the perspective of anhanced analysis by AI.

Keywords: Intelligence analysis; Indications and Warnings; information value; information layency; analysis optimization

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1. Introduction

To start with the definition of the term, the word ‘relevant’ is an adjective designating something that reveals, that stands out. And ‘relevance’ means the quality of being relevant; significance, significance, importance (DEX on-line).

In another definition (Merriam Webster on-line), ‘relevance’ means the relationship with the subject of interest, or with practical and, in particular, social applicability, synonymous with ‘relevance’.

At the same time, another dictionary (Nouveau Petit Larousse Illustré) shows that ‘relevant’ means dependent, and ‘relevance’ indicates a relationship of dependence.

Also, another definition (Oxford Dictionary Online) shows that ‘relevance’ is either “a close connection with the aspect under discussion or the situation in which the subject is”, or “the fact of being valuable and useful to the public in everyday life and activity”.

According to the Reader’s Digest Universal Dictionary, ‘relevant’ means “relative to the field under discussion, on topic, pertinent.”

In order not to neglect Artificial Intelligence (AI), the Bing engine shows that “relevance is the extent to which something is related to or useful to the topic in progress or discussed, the extent to which a piece of information provides realistic clarifications about the intelligence problem or topic addressed and thus contributes to their elucidation. In the context of search engines, relevance refers to the extent to which the results of a search correspond to the user’s investigation. Search engines use algorithms to determine relevance by analyzing factors such as keywords in the search process, the content of the web page, and the user’s search history.”

2. Problem Statement: Information Selection Issues

In the context of the intensification of interactions energized by the Information Age dynamics, the problem face by analysts in all areas of social life is not so much to obtain the information necessary for current activities, but, rather, to select the information that can contribute most effectively to the elaboration of valuable analysis. The mentality of analysts is to disregard no information *ab initio*, to absorb any information, according to the ‘pig principle’: ‘The pig eats anything and nothing is thrown away from the pig’. That is, the intelligence service accumulates any information, and no information is discarded. The criteria for selecting the necessary

information include its quality, its usefulness for the analytical product needed to be produced or, in general, its significance for the field of interest. These qualities and meanings are often integrated by the term *relevance*, i.e. the analyst retains the 'relevant information' for the work to solve an intelligence problem and generate an intelligence product. It is worth noticing that the term 'relevance' has a certain relational connotation, while synonyms (meaning, importance, significance) have an absolute aspect of intrinsic quality, a value of its own, independent. These intrinsic qualities lead to a characteristic of an objective nature. Namely the *value of the information*, if one can aspire to an absolute value. Of course, the Subject makes the selection of information with a primary estimate of its 'value', its usefulness, measured according to its own interests and scale of values, a scale that must integrate both intrinsic attributes and relational utility.

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Regarding the absolute value, one would think about the Wiener model, where the value of information can receive mathematical values in cybernetic approach. Such approach would allow the design of high-performance equipment in the field of communications, including cryptology, as well as big data management and equipment. But the field of intelligence is not pure science, and what would correspond to the value of information cannot be calculated mathematically, because it depends on factors of human and social nature (in the broad sense). Besides, the value of information has relational utility for the specific objective pursued. Anticipating further references, it can be mentioned that operational utility also reveals the *dynamic character of the value of information*, in relation to the developments in the security environment.

At the same time, the association, synonymity with terms like meaning, significance, and importance refers to the inevitable subjectivity of the concept of relevance, during the process of knowing and understanding the reality / security environment.

So, the crucial question is 'What is essential in the mass of information available?'

The value of the items in the information flow that the analyst is confronted with is a process that takes place both 'at first glance', as well as later on, coldly. Therefore, the analyst perceives both an intrinsic value and a relational value. A simple example of intrinsic value is the information regarding a large amount of money ('a purse of

coins'). Regarding the relational aspect, the analyst primarily distinguishes data that refers to one's own interests, such as information about one's own family.

3. Solution Approach: Subjectivity of Perception of Relevance

The well-established general principle of the intelligence field holds that the analyst's duty is to *provide truth to power*. But the estimation of relevance occurs as a primary perception, before the estimation of the truth, which implies a greater component of conscious and diligent elaboration. In intelligence, the perception of relevance happens as early as the Collection phase, when the intelligence operator decides on the acquisition of new information, unless the emerging information was already within the parameters of the Collection Plan. Thus, the data collector does not have the responsibility to make judgments on the integrated truth, but has the mission to select, according to certain criteria, data and information from the accessible information space. By extension, the relevance of information is evaluated even instinctively, including by animals, which can pass carelessly by objects or events that are not of interest (neither possible gain, nor possible danger). In any case, the relevance of the information is 'in the eyes of the beholder'.

Intuitive estimation is explained by the priority destination of the biological senses, namely the provision of information associated with the fundamental needs of the individual, including security, the imperative of survival. Therefore, the relevance of the acquired information is a quality integrated in risk management, more precisely in the first stage, that of risk assessment, or of sensing the possibilities of profit (in the sense of the Interest of the Subject).

In broader terms, relevance is the association of information with the Subject's Interest, i.e. the observant Subject of the environment perceives different information and automatically associates it with different interests of his own. The extent to which a certain information is connected by the Subject with a Self-Interest takes the form of the characteristic called the 'relevance of the information' in question, for that Subject and, we might add, at that moment. Here, both the individual subjective character of relevance and the dynamics of the value of relevance emerge according to the evolution of the environment and the evolution of the Subject's Interest. In general, a Subject will always consider as more relevant information related to close people, such as family members, hierarchical authorities or people with high affective significance (girlfriend, fiancé).

The relevance of information is a prefiguration and a manifestation of the individual's willingness to integrate the perceived information into his own model of reality. Human beings cannot observe, understand and control reality in its complex entirety, with multidimensional, multi-domain presentation and dynamics. That is why the human mind operates with simplified versions of reality, constructions that are useful to the goals of each individual, as well as to human society in general. It is Bertrand Russel who said that approximation is the supreme form of intellectual sophistication (Star Talk) and that, although it seems like a paradox, all exact sciences are dominated by the idea of approximation (Crystal Clear Mathematics). In this context, for limited sequences of reality, such as different specific situations or possible or real courses of action in different domains, the human mind (also the animal brain, for the matter), works with architectural or functional models that it projects consciously or even subconsciously. Such a model is not a solution to a particular problem but is "part of the natural functionality of the human cognitive process, which has been demonstrated across a wide range of fields of knowledge, from medical analysis to the analysis of stock market transactions" (Hauer, p ix). More specifically, these models "establish certain conceptions and expectations regarding cause-effect relationships" (Hauer, 1999, p. 9) and are then used to "process and interpret information through these models or filters" (Hauer, 1999, p. 9). Individual cognitive models are personal and intuitive, which imprints the subjectivity of perception on the depth and the way of association of each received information to the individual model, thus causing the inherent subjectivity of information relevance for each individual receiver.

These models/maps of reality are strictly individual and result from a process of filtering perceptions through their own criteria generated by a variety of "biological, social, and individual constraints" (Maior, 2013, p. 279). The intelligence analyst uses these filters at the beginning of information processing, a process where the function of the human psyche is "primarily eliminatory, not productive" (Maior, 2013, p. 279). Following selection, including through the relevance filter, acquired information continues to be processed through three mechanisms of shaping human perception: *generalization*, *omission*, and *distortion* (Maior, 2013, p. 279).

In the construction of models for approximation and streamlining reality, constraints of fidelity to reality intervene. These constraints can be described as presumptions regarding envisaged situations or courses of action (Mocanu, 2019). Presumptions can act in favor of the correctness of the analysis, by consolidating the arguments for describing the truth and by judiciously steering the analytical efforts. Unfortunately,

the presumptions can also act counterproductively, by directing the efforts on erroneous courses of action, even to the point of omitting the correct image of reality, with catastrophic consequences (a kind of analyst blindness, possible to occur even for an entire analysis collective, when a 'herd' vision on the analyzed subject is applied).

In the subsequent use of information, the integration chain includes consciously established, more or less refined models. These work formats, which can be individual or can be institutionally assumed, constitute *indicators* on the route of which data or events are detected, called *indications* on courses of action of interest (towards either risks or opportunities). Therefore, the information received is immediately 'controlled' in terms of the quality of a significant *indication* for a certain *indicator* tracked through the functionality of the intelligence system, throughout the *intelligence cycle*. Thus, the relevance correctly attributed to the information brought to the attention of intelligence agencies can facilitate the analysis from targeting to collection, analysis and even during capitalization through decision and concrete action in the security environment. Therefore, the relevance, value, significance, and usefulness of information is evaluated in terms of an *indication* to be instrumented in the analysis, in terms of a certain course of action.

The analyst's duty is to drain the events of all possible meanings, that is, of all the possibilities of framing this information / *indication* in explaining / elucidating the courses of action. Therefore, the estimation of the relevance of a piece of information has a multidimensional feature, in order to reflect the possible value of the *indication* in courses of action, different scenarios, even unpleasant ones. In fact, within the *warning function* of intelligence domain, arguable the most important functionality of intelligence analysis (Mocanu, 2015), "the critical task of intelligence analysts... is to identify and precisely disrupt the few nuggets of information correlated with possible subsequent events, which can be called 'signals' (*indications*) from the mass of irrelevant or confusing information... which can be called 'noises'." (Gentry & Joseph, 2019).

However, even at the institutional level of intelligence analysis, as in other domains, the analyst operates only with a simplified version of reality. This version is a model with limitations admitted by the restrictions imposed by the interest of the Actor served (we are not primarily interested in the security of Nauru Island). On the other hand, the information available even for that limited version is scarce and the information of major interest is even less. The analyst must undertake the sorting of

data and information in terms of their supposed or obvious coherence with that simplified reality, which suggestively defines the term information relevance. Without going into details, it can be argued that the clearest indications are those that highlight anomalies compared to routine developments, events such as 'the dog did not bark' (Developments on searching for anomalies in Nye, 2004, p. 14).

A counterweight of subjectivity would be the possibility of objectively determining relevance through measurable values, which would lead to a metric of information relevance. In principle, this metric would concern the extent to which that information is used in the analytical process; the time required to process that information in the analysis; the amount of feedback received in relation to that information, an element that reflects the interest generated by that information downstream. Although these parameters of information dynamics are more applicable to cybernetic data, they can also inspire solutions to be considered for strictly subjective parameters. But obviously, this possibility cannot be applied to the requirement of instantaneous estimation of the relevance of information, in the situation of collection or to the initial perception of information, by the current intelligence analyst.

4. Areas of Information Relevance

The coherence of the information with the Interest of the Subject / analyst is manifested in context, in relation to several factors that can affect the course of action; for example, the individual features of the observing entity (the Subject or system that the analyst serves); the concrete situation (the course of action considered); the context of a debate, of a controversy; or the period of time / moment of perception / evaluation of the information.

As far as the **Entity** / Subject / analyst is concerned, pursued Interest is essential, according to the above-mentioned issues. As far as Interest is concerned, the natural hierarchy can be described in connection with Maslow's pyramid, namely in the order of links with natural needs, interpreted in the respective security context. It is very important that the Interest is well understood and internalized in its natural and profound dimension, not the declarative one. The hierarchy of needs (as passive deficits) determines the energy engaged in service of Interest associated with that of need (considering the Interest as an objective towards which an active commitment is engaged). In other words, as the Latins said, *primum vivere, deinde filosofare*.

Regarding the **Situation**, it is about the connections of the information with the scenario / course of action. For example, what does the information have to do with factors that impact upon a certain military operation. As the case may be, elements of connection between information and a concrete situation can be analyzed according to different taxonomies, such as: the PDSA managerial stages (Plan, Do, Study, Act – the Deming Cycle / The W. Edwards Deming Institute); the OODA loop (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act) of Boyd Cycle (Mocanu, 2018, pp. 90-91), the fields of a country study (Mocanu, 2018, p. 25), the risk factors identified in risk management. Another taxonomy of the situations considered includes the fields of Diplomacy, Intelligence, Military, Economics (DIME). The choice of the preferred taxonomy is at the disposal of the analyst, according to different criteria, but it is essential that these areas meet the requirement of being collectively exhaustive, i.e. taken together to cover all situations in which information could be relevant. A clear example is the consideration of information in the fields of interest of foreign intelligence and counterintelligence, hence the need for cooperation between the two 'tribes.' Even during the Collection, as a stage of the intelligence activity, a selection factor according to relevance is the measure of framing the information in the elements of the Search Plan of the collection department, which reflects the inclusion of that aspect in the indicators tracked by analysts.

Regarding the **context of a debate** –information relevance reflects its importance in the construction of arguments for a certain theory, in contradictory disputes, in polemics and, least but not last, in negotiations. In this case, the data/information that turns the situation upside down are paramount, information that takes the interlocutor out of the comfort zone, that sends the discussion 'out of the box', to another level of reasoning, significantly favorable to the one who makes such contributions to the debate. For the purposes of domination or victory during a polemic, such information must also present the aspect of surprise, because the surprise of the opponent has the desired confusing effect for the success of that point of view.

Regarding **the Temporal context**, the dynamics of relationships that link information to a certain context, controversy, concrete situation or entity/actor is important, i.e. what was relevant at a given time, may lose relevance or become irrelevant later. So, the relevance of each piece of information fluctuates depending on the evolution of the scenario in which it participates. Below, we will briefly explore a certain latency of the relevance of information, due to the latency of its value in the analysis. In any context of considering the relevance of information, it

is important to consider the capacity of information to intervene decisively either in the dynamics of realities, in the genesis/evolution of a significant interaction, or in the modification of the major characteristics of an actor or of an interaction. In other words, the *warning indication* component is a determining factor in the hierarchy of information relevance and also prevails in the logic of the hierarchy of the Subject's interests.

The manifestation of the phenomena or realities reflected by the respective information on the factors of definition/evolution of the hard power or soft power components, namely whether the elements described constitute factors of constraint (for hard power) or persuasion (for soft power). The intrinsic substance that establishes the credibility of the power component in question is important, and, consequently, the credibility of the information, which determines, in turn, the relevance of that information.

5. The Value of Information on Actors, Interactions and Objective Conditions

When obtained, the primary data or information has a momentary value, which represents the snapshot of the moment, an initial promise, and reflects features of physical systems or events that evolve over time. The value, or qualities of information are manifested in ten dimensions (Hu), including four intrinsic dimensions (accuracy, completeness, consistency, confidentiality / protection) and six extrinsic domains (reliability, opportunity, freshness, relevance, validity, utility). Among these, relevance prevails because it puts the information in context, under two aspects: it is related to the interest / purpose of evaluating that information; and it is instinctively synthesized at the primary level, in order to be immediately actionable in risk management of all kinds. These ten categories allow, to a greater or lesser extent, the development of metrics of the value of information.

Whether it refers to information about Actors, Interactions or Objective conditions of the security environment, the value of the information refers, in the second stage, to Interactions, because the intelligence services follow processes / phenomena that take place in the security environment. Of course, analysts start from 'photographs' of the capabilities of potentially hostile Actors, but the estimates are made for further developments, especially developments of interactions that may be antagonistic to

the Interest of the Subject (or favorable, when the analyst pursues opportunities in the context of courses of action).

Each piece of information can fit into the dynamics of multiple *courses of action* out of a lot of possible courses of action. This lot of courses of action / *space of possible courses of action* is subject to analytical tracking by the intelligence services. The courses of action in which the information is framed can be both prospective and retrospective. The value of information for retrospective courses of action is manifested in police-like investigations ('Who dunnit?'), for example in the analysis of terrorist actions, as well as for the evaluation of the effects of combat actions (Battle Damage Assessment) or for Lessons learned, with obvious relevance in future scenarios / courses of action, including with educational value.

A new information can confirm or deny the course of action which is connected to and can split a course of action into two or more subsequent courses of action. Moreover, the analytical procedure of *competing hypotheses* highlights the value of the information that refutes a certain hypothesis because, in this way, the analyst's effort can be transferred to the study of other working hypotheses / other courses of action.

In this evolution, information presents either *perishability*, or a *latent value* that can be prolonged or diminished until the exhaustion of any utility within that course of action. Just as the perishability of the value of information automatically determines a perishability of its relevance, the latency of the value of information also obviously generates a latency of relevance, a reserve kept by any prudent analyst, who does not abandon some data on the grounds that their usefulness has been exhausted in the substance of a certain intelligence product. However, the information value latency is also included in the 'pig principle', mentioned above. At a certain moment, all information can fit as pieces in a puzzle that has not yet received the necessary attention, the value of information is dynamic, depending on developments in the scenario considered. This also leads to the increased value of information regarded as 'actionable information' / '*actionable intelligence*', which shows its practical value at the time of carrying out the action that includes it as concrete operational parameters.

At borderline conditions, the lack of relevance defines *irrelevant information*, assessed as unnecessary to the consideration interest. Irrelevance is also relative (irrelevance is still a kind of relevance), information considered irrelevant in one context can gain relevance if considered in another context / timeframe. Examples

of irrelevant information are either retrospective (redundant, outdated, incomplete) or prospective (inspiring expectations that are either exaggerated, underestimated, or no expectations at all).

6. Analysis of Results: Consequences of the Subjectivity of Information Relevance on Analysis

The relevance of information is not a landmark in the doctrine or logic of the architecture of intelligence analysis departments, although its importance is intuitively accepted, undeniably. As mentioned before, subjectivity generated by the action of personal perception in the evaluation of data and information occurs right from the stage of their acquisition. Therefore, subjectivity diminishes the appetite to theoretically examine the term of *information relevance*. However, several aspects can be highlighted that can constitute starting points in such an approach.

In terms of complexity theory, the perception of events in the security environment is confronted with the increase of entropy in the conditions of human society at the beginning of the third millennium. In the Information age, information abounds, interactions intensify, causality is less obvious, as the variables are multiple, and interdependencies are rapid. That is why analysts and independent observers have difficulty in attributing relevance to new information. Complexity causes diminishing trust in the perspective of analyses, long-term predictions become unreliable, credible predictions are more retained even for common estimates. Interest increases in *Current Intelligence*, which is the easiest to distort or misunderstand, but this probably shows an increased need to seek relevance and quick certainties.

The perception of information relevance generates *correction coefficients* (Mocanu, 2018, pp. 66-69) for the calculable or even for known *a posteriori* values for the associated elements within the reference domain / within all components of the security environment (Actors, Interactions, and Objective conditions).

In order to reduce the difficulties of assessing the relevance of the information collected by areas of interest, the information space is organized through the activity of '*Indications & Warnings*' (I&W). This is not the place here for more elaboration on the topic, but it can be specified that the *indicators* pre-establish the information requirements in descriptive structures for different courses of action, while the *indications* are data and information that appear gradually and confirm or deny

certain courses of action. Based on the indications, depending on their relevance, *intelligence warnings* are generated, either in the composition of general reports, or as specially issued reports, in case of emergencies. In fact, in the hierarchy of information by relevance, urgency is the primary criterion, for practical, operational, risk management reasons.

In order to increase the collection of relevant information, an easy-to-guess measure is to intensify the contacts between analysts and the beneficiaries of intelligence products, in order to refine and clarify the *intelligence requirements* to be processed and judiciously included in the Search Plan. This link can be strengthened through frequent dialogue between the analyst and the beneficiary not only up-front, when setting the intelligence requirements, but also while the analysis process progresses in the development of the intelligence product using the respective category of information.

Eye-balling information relevance has a significant impact on the analyst's time, in modeling the activity on different levels: in current analysis (maximum pressure), the estimative analysis (maximum attention, here information relevance must be determined accurately, and assumptions must be reviewed), the long-term analysis (strategic forecasting capacity). In all these analysis planes / perspectives, the vulnerabilities of approach under edge conditions have serious consequences: while the exaggeration of meanings can lead to paranoia (hundreds of risks and threats, panic at any new information), the neglect of meanings for some information can lead to apathy and unforgivable negligence. Both exaggerations can cause serious failures of the intelligence services, as a result of erroneous analytical products.

A different angle about information latency refers to the time it takes from information collection to dissemination of the intelligence product (Omand). This approach is not wrong, it just looks at intelligence process management, not at information value / relevance. While supporting efforts to optimize intelligence activity, this approach does not help either understanding the concept of *information value* or *information relevance or* helps efforts to optimize the selection and exploitation of information in the colossal flow typical for the Information Age.

From the point of view of risk management (Mocanu, 2018, pp. 36-70), the directions of analytical attention in the study of information relevance refer to all three components of Danger: Impact, Probability and Incidence Urgency.

In addressing the problems raised by the management of information relevance, the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) appears as a prospective solution, which can fundamentally accelerate the primary selection of information, even with grouping incoming data on different courses of action, either preset or identified and developed by AI.

7. Conclusions and Future Work

The relevance attributed to information is a first filter applied by the human being / analyst on any data encountered in a security context. The information available to an individual actor or a risk management institution is subject to several processes that can limit or damage it: either limitation when protected by the opposing party, or its intentional distortion through disinformation actions, or limitations caused by reduced collection capacities. After the issue regarding the correctness of the available information, the correct perception / estimation of information relevance is the first problem of the analysis, especially in the conditions of the Information Age, where the scarcity of information does not seem to be the problem, yet the selection of relevant pieces of information.

Like presumptions, the relevance of information is a factor of either consolidation or destabilization of intelligence analysis, therefore a factor of ensuring the quality of the decision / management based on intelligence products. In fact, information relevance is also important because it generates consistency for the other qualities that make up the value of information. The subdomains of intelligence analysis where addressing the relevance of information is useful are Warning (through I&W), management of presumptions, information management, collation of information, evaluation of the credibility of sources.

Further studies on information relevance in intelligence should probably focus on advanced methods, mainly AI, of highlighting relevant information for optimal use in intelligence analysis.

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