CASE STUDIES IN TEACHING INTELLIGENCE: PROS AND CONS

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Abstract

Intelligence is as much a profession as it is a discipline, as it is the gathering of information and the information itself. Intelligence is both a product and a process. It has a specific jargon, working methodologies, specific knowledge, and its own doctrines, theorizing it; it has its own means and methods of work and has grown into a fully-fledged academic field. Strategic intelligence is constantly trying to get straight two fundamental questions of the activity: what is its purpose, and what are its methods. The rest are a myriad of adjacent questions regarding objectives, how they are selected, what are the terminological details, its history, its limits etc.

Keywords*: intelligence education, theory, practice, case-studies, guidelines.*

Introduction

One of the foremost requests nearly every intelligence student has, from the first weeks of study, is that teachers support every theoretical enterprise with consistent case-studies, specific examples illustrating theory, not lacking a dose of sensationalism in revealing intelligences` insight into sometimes high profile cases, and maybe a different perspective from the one publicly known. And it is only natural to expect to learn from the lessons of the past and to pair theory and empiricism for a more efficient learning process.

However, my personal experience is that students are only partly content with references to case studies of successes or failures of other countries` intelligence, instead stressing a need to be more familiar with local intelligence`s activity. Both situations are not

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without difficulties for intelligence academics, and even more so for scholars with extensive practical experience gained in years of work in the field. And some of those difficulties which I intend to explore are related to the very familiar challenges current intelligence poses: in understanding external cases, there are constraints pertaining to differences in political strategy, vision, and decision-making. The global and local strategic equation are also shifting factors and local interests might differ from global ones, which makes case-studies of external intelligence actions difficult to apply as pre-defined, borrowed recipes for local, individual problems. Regarding internal case-studies, there is, from one perspective, the aspect of secrecy; since Romanian intelligence is young, most of its experiences are still classified; from a different perspective, there are familiar challenges we all know too well: oversight can, in some instances, be used politically, generating a false public sentiment of illicit activities in intelligence; the legal framework in countries such as ours is frequently lacking and inadequate to current threats, leaving local intelligence with rather blunt working instruments.

Teaching intelligence: a few guidelines

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Loch Johnson, in his "Handbook of Intelligence Studies"(2017, p. 3), referred to intelligence as an **information product**, a **process** – formally known as the "intelligence cycle" –, a "**set of missions**" specific to secret services, and "a cluster of **people and organizations**" responsible for the former three missions.

Most **intelligence studies** programs in Romania and elsewhere are relatively new as an academic field or branch of social sciences and tend to employ a significant percentage of former and current intelligence officers as teachers[1]. And this, maybe also in order to avoid the well-known saying "those who can do, those who can`t teach". It is important to make intelligence teaching neither purely theoretical, nor a field for former professionals no longer connected to reality, a so-called "cemetery for the elephants", but a discipline well-adjusted in order to provide viable solutions for the overall national security.

The purpose of intelligence studies is twofold: to develop **academic research** in order to improve the intelligence process and product, and to **form generations of intelligence professionals**, while also striving to promote a security culture. In other words, intelligence studies are useful for a strategic development of intelligence, both from an academic and from a practical perspective.

It is important for students and for the development of this rather young field of education that those who teach a basically practical subject have actual insider knowledge of the subject, and in my opinion, intelligence is one of those fields where scientific research and practical experience need to be closely linked in order to make progress possible. Besides being an academic field, subject of necessary research, intelligence is a profession with requirements for **advanced skills**, and more than in other fields, the professionals and the researchers need to team up and sometimes even change roles in order to get the best of both worlds. Moreover, also using intelligence professionals in academic activity is a means of transferring expertise and institutional culture to future theoreticians and practitioners.

To use a metaphor, teaching intelligence without the practical side would be similar to teaching physics without doing any experiments, because intelligence is one of those disciplines which deals with concrete, empirical realities, therefore even sometimes described as empiricist (Budiansky, 2000); I do not entirely agree with

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[1] For the purposes of the present paper, we maybe need to define intelligence studies as a branch of security studies (US) / strategic studies (UK), academic field which distinguished itself from military theory, according to some authors, and from International Relations, for others after World War II. It was obviously a field of interest for Romanian academia only late after the 1989 Revolution.

the characterization, because practice and theory are intertwined in intelligence, but this is further argument that practical experience and historical accounts are tantamount to the field.

Practitioners can be and often do become good theoreticians, due to their extended experience; there are many such examples, starting with authors such as Sherman Kent, CIA officer and father of intelligence analysis, Richards Heuer, CIA veteran intelligence analyst whose intended manual for government officials became, after 1999, one of the leading world studies in intelligence analysis, "The Psychology of Intelligence Analysis", to other equally famous contributors to theory due to their extensive practice, such as Sir David Omand, former chief of GCHQ, or Mark Lowenthall, assistant director for the CIA and staff director of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

Intelligence and security studies became a priority for the Romanian academic environment only in the past two decades, but the field has known major developments, with its introduction as a distinct study area for several military institutions which form professionals, among which the "Mihai Viteazul" National Intelligence Academy, the Military Technical Academy, the academies of the terrestrial, naval, and air forces in Sibiu, Constanţa and Braşov, as well as the Bucharest Police Academy and "Carol I" National Defence University.

Civil higher education institutions such as the prestigious Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj, the University of Bucharest, and the universities from Timişoara, Iaşi and Sibiu have extensive intelligence or security studies programs, offering from bachelor`s degrees to master`s and PhDs.

On one side, military academies have the advantage of forming intelligence and security specialists, while also ensuring appropriate conditions for discussions of classified information, and on the other side, civil universities allow for better awareness at society level about the national security risks, threats and vulnerabilities, helping to make safer security environment. Michael Warner, for example, would place intelligence studies in two different categories, in line with the dichotomy between civil and military education institutions, considering the acute need for secrecy. He referred to "intelligence studies (...) conducted one way **on the *outside*, with no official access**

to original records, and another way **on the *inside*, where a few scholars have intermittently enjoyed** sanctioned (if not always complete) **access to the extant documentation**" (Warner, 2017, p. 17).

I think that higher education dealing in intelligence and security should be open to exchanges, so teachers from the military academies would be also working in the civil ones and vice versa, which makes it possible to exchange valuable findings from both worlds. Cooperation in this regard, too, is the key to capacity building.

It is also significant that military academies and institutions, such as the National Intelligence Academy, are responsible for the **continuous education of intelligence officers**, a highly relevant function because it helps them grow professionally and further develop their career, thus enhancing overall institutional performance. In this regard, the professional development of intelligence personnel must also be a priority for intelligence managers, who need to be involved in finding innovative, motivating solutions for officers, as well as the means to rapidly develop training systems according to the objective institutional necessities of the intelligence agencies.

Case-studies: theoretical delimitations

The practical side of intelligence and the major contribution practitioners can bring to the field of intelligence studies starts from their actual experience, which can be a premise for in-depth analysis of actual situations, in other words, *case studies*.

The case study method of teaching actually consists of an **in-depth investigation of a single event**, ideally with data from several sources. According to some authors, case studying is "not a research technique or method in itself (...), but rather a strategy of approaching the socio-human, often from a qualitative point of view" (Chelcea, 2007, p. 598). In other authors' opinion, case studying is a research strategy, "an investigation through which a contemporaneous event is being researched in its real life context" (Chelcea, 2007, p. 598).

The actual advantage of case studying is that it starts with theory and returns to theory, testing it, enriching it and enhancing its empirical foundation. A case study can refer to a number of situations, starting

from an individual, a group, a community, a specific instance, an episode, event, phenomenon etc.

In order to be relevant, **a case study needs to either reveal a very typical situation, illustrating a theory, or a completely atypical one**. The essential is that cases need to be studied intensively and holistically, and exploration and understanding tends to precede over quantification and confirmation of theory.

According to Septimiu Chelcea (Chelcea, 2007, p. 601), case studies have three common traits:

- They refer to a **concrete research**;

- They study a **contemporary phenomenon** rather than a historical one;

- The respective phenomenon has a **complex structure**, being difficult to isolate from a specific context.

A specific advantage of case studies is that they can provide both quantitative and qualitative proofs, while allowing for a complex image of a quantum of interacting factors. Case studies were classified according to different criteria, such as cause-effect of their very subjects. In this regard, we can use causal or explanatory case-studies, descriptive or explorative ones, intrinsic – when they research a unique event/phenomenon, instrumental ones, when used to test a theory, and collective or multiple ones, when similar factors appear in several situations.

Another obvious benefit of case studying is the balance it brings between general or theoretical and empirical knowledge. They contribute to overall scientific development and can lead to new research, if used judiciously. They are useful in generating working hypothesis and confirm or infirming them in order to advance new theory.

Challenges in using case studies are, I think, obvious: **choosing a case-study cannot be done randomly**, but rather very carefully, in order to generate progress. Natural **biases** can pervert the choice of a case study, meaning that the researcher can be inclined to favour those particular case studies which confirm his theory and initial assumptions. It would obviously be more useful to case study situations offering counter-arguments to prevailing assumptions.

Maybe a good example of such – even unintentional – biases is in the award-winning book *Thinking Fast and Slow*, where Nobel-prize

winner Daniel Kahneman illustrates the way the human mind tends to short-circuit extensive reasoning in order to save energy and effort and confirm/apply previously known patterns. One simple and revealing example in this regard is that of the "Librarian or Farmer" Steve, a "very shy and withdrawn invariably helpful (man) but with little interest in people or in the real world. A meek and tidy soul, he has a need for order and structure and a passion for detail" (Kahneman, 2013, pp. 6-7). To the natural question whether Steve is a farmer or librarian, most people would take the shortcut, considering occupational stereotypes would qualify him as a librarian. Nevertheless, careful contextual analysis indicates the ratio of male librarians to male farmers is so small, that the probability for Steve to be a librarian is only one in 20.

Case studies, such as that offered by Kahneman, must reveal hidden problems, because in this manner they will offer opportunities to take actions against further problems, as well as a better strategic understanding of the present and new research for the future.

As I mentioned, case studies ideally need to rely on data from several sources in order to be valuable lessons, but this also raises some legal and ethical questions, particularly for intelligence practitioners, who most times have first-hand knowledge on particular national security cases. Sharing too much in unclassified contexts would be a violation of legal provisions, while not saying anything, particularly in those situations where some measures are enforced in order to keep the secrecy, would be contrary to the rule of using multiple methods to collect data for case studying. And there is also the risk for the practitioner to ignore most publically available data due to inside knowledge.

In intelligence, case studies generally rely on intelligence successes or failures of the country`s own agencies or of reliable partners with similar responsibilities, but it is only the highly public ones which make it to the forefront.

Limitations in case studying

One of the most difficult questions I had to answer in my academic career was about whether specific events of the Romanian society in the former decade were actually failures of the Romanian intelligence. Student questions such as whether nosocomial infections

and the superficial manner of dealing with them in the Romanian public health system are easier to manage now, after extensive communications by the Parliamentary Oversight Committee, former decision-makers and the Service itself, but would have been much more difficult to answer under the normal **secrecy regulations** applying to most intelligence activities.

And a particularly difficult enterprise for Romanian intelligence studies is, with the Romanian intelligence field and agencies being still young – to bring to classrooms case-studies from our Romanian experience, not because there is a lack of such experience, but because it is, for the most, still classified.

As any other research instrument, case-studying must fulfil specific criteria of validity and reliability in order to be considered useful. Testing the validity of a case-study must be done through honest answers for two basic questions (Kumar, 2011, p. 178): 1) is it providing answers to the research questions; and 2) are the answers using appropriate methods and procedures?

And while case-studying in intelligence can be used both for quantitative and qualitative research, it is obviously more difficult to standardize data collection and to afterwards establish validity and reliability for qualitative research, since reliability means a consistency of the findings when situations repeat.

Validity of a research instrument can be measured, according to some researchers (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, pp. 105-117), based on four basic traits:

a. **Credibility**, meaning the results need to be believable for participants;

b. **Transferability**, that is the possibility to generalize results and transfer them to other, similar situations; this is a trait most difficult to establish in intelligence studies due to particularities pertaining to various fields; for example, it would be difficult to translate the American CIA actions into significant case-studies for the Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI), since the later is an internal security service and, as such, it needs to comply with very different criteria regarding the legality of its actions.

c. **Dependability**, meaning that observing similar events would lead to the same conclusions.

d. **Confirmability** or the corroboration of findings by others.

Intelligence failures from other states are among the most common case-studies we use in the classroom, because they are readily accessible and highly public affairs. But they are not always as relevant for the current intelligence situation in Romania, because the intelligence institutions are radically different in their missions, legislation, subordination and manner of cooperation.

For example, the most generally known recent intelligence failure is considered to be 9/11 and the American Intelligence Community`s inability to prevent it. First of all, the significance of the event and its quintessential case-study quality derives from the fact that it happened to the world`s greatest superpower and to some of the most famous intelligence agencies, if not the most powerful. The relevance of the case and its major impact stems from this very fact, while similar events – admittedly with fewer casualties – in countries such as Iraq or Afghanistan went practically unnoticed, despite hundreds of victims.

Nonetheless, there are fewer lessons intelligence students in Romania can draw from this dramatic event than one would initially think, due to several differences in the context; the general reason established by the Oversight committee in the US Congress as having led to the attacks was a lack of cooperation and information sharing among American security and intelligence institutions, a total of 16, whereas this would be rather difficult to replicate in the relatively small Romanian intelligence community, in which all actors have precise roles which do not often overlap.

There is also the thorny issue of the FBI headquarters failing to request a warrant for the informatics search of one of the attacker`s laptop, as exposed by FBI whistle-blower Coleen Rowley. She blames FBI organizational culture and hierarchy for this omission, since inexperienced headquarter officers were responsible for requesting warrants on behalf of regional offices. This is yet another significant difference from Romanian intelligence, which, on one side, has no law enforcement capacity, but for which procedures regarding national security warrants are different.

A significant reason for the deficit of knowledge which led to "9/11" was supposedly ignoring intelligence from foreign partners, which signalled suspect activities from the attackers. This is actually a universally valuable lesson in cooperation and information sharing with partners from all around the world.

Maybe one of the most worrisome conclusions of the "9/11" investigations in the US is the finding that not enough attention was paid by the CIA to adequate HUMINT, to providing the adequate resources. CIA had no assets within Al Qaeda before "9/11". While NSA was late to translate SIGINT intercepts of suspected terrorists, the overall American intelligence community had not enough knowledge about the Middle Eastern drivers and objectives. And this is yet another valuable lesson for any intelligence agency: the human (re)source is essential for progress, as are general resources for the national intelligence process.

But in retrospect, all things tend to seem easier and the perspective suddenly becomes much clearer once the pressure of time and imminent threat are off. And this, I think, is yet another limitation of case-studies.

Studying domestic cases can also prove difficult from more than one perspective. There is the obvious **need for secrecy** which greatly limits what can be discussed in public contexts. But there are also other types of impediments; for example, there are **strong public narratives** on some thorny issues, generated sometimes by the media or by involved/interested parties, but, in other instances, even by state authorities which, for political reasons, intentionally distort reality, reinterpreting an agency`s actions and even its fundamental missions.

In this case, given the difficulties of publicly presenting what is mostly classified information, many issues remain unanswered and impossible to case-studying. And there is also the problem of having to counter the official narrative, which, on one side, would undermine trust in public authorities, and on the other, would generate low morale among intelligence professionals, as well as a deficient organizational climate.

It is, nonetheless, important to the state that some initiative of case-studying past Romanian intelligence failures and successes was made by the Romanian Intelligence Service in its official *Monograph*

1990-2015 (2015) which, among others, describes controversial cases and operational successes throughout the institution`s evolution.

The case of the three Romanian journalists kidnapped in March 2005 in Baghdad and their safe return home was one of those relevant case-studies, able to illustrate perfectly the relevance of close **cooperation** among state institutions – in this particular case, SRI, External Intelligence Service (SIE) and Defence General Intelligence Directorate (DGIA), coordinated in their efforts by the establishment of an operative cell at the highest level in the state. This particular case was also a model of how close international cooperation and the good connections the Romanian intelligence had in the Middle East brought about extremely favourable results and saved human lives. Bringing the Romanian journalists back home safe was an intelligence success which amplified further cooperation with other foreign partners, in order to help solve similar cases.

Lack of adequate legislation, in Romania`s case, can also make it difficult to generalize common-sense conclusions from case-studying actions of other states. Terrorist online propaganda, for example, is one of those actions almost impossible to prosecute until very recently, since no Romanian law mentioned it as a national security threat or crime. Similar difficulties were specific to the past decades with regard to cyber-attacks and cybercrime, or even with legislation regarding the status of foreign citizens (which were, thus, difficult to expel or pronounce undesirable).

Other cases are, however, **universal lessons** in "how no to" practice intelligence. The Iraq invasion by the US is one such lesson, proving political involvement in intelligence and "**intelligence to please**" can lead to disastrous fails, such as claiming a country has nuclear arsenal only to prove, after military invasion with high costs for both parties, no such weapons exists.

Brief conclusions

Generalization is difficult for intelligence case-studies, due to different approaches at several levels, but a structured comparative analysis can, nonetheless, help identify some common traits.

I think it is a duty of honour for intelligence practitioners to have consistent in-depth analysis of their activity, and to honestly share their experience, in good faith and in observance of all rules and regulations governing the field.

Intelligence services, unfortunately, do not have the time and means to theorize, therefore making academia (both civil and military) a particularly adequate environment to further research and develop the field. And an academic environment such as the National Intelligence Academy or similar institutions attached to intelligence are real accomplishments because, on one side, they benefit from direct practitioners experience, and on the other, due to particular observance of the rules regarding access to classified information, help create a proper environment for in-depth analysis on sensitive topics.

Not only higher education institutions such as the "Mihai Viteazul" National Intelligence Academy are not obsolete, but they are an **objective necessity** for bringing together the **intelligence community, academia, similar partner institutions, and civil society**. This type of education centres have a significant and growing role, which brings added value to the intelligence activity in itself, but mostly to the overall state of security.

It is not, thus, a surprise to see the model of an intelligence academy was even promoted by French President Emmanuel Macron, in the form of an European Intelligence Academy, apt of "creating a shared intelligence culture among Member States" and responsible "for raising awareness among European and national institutions on intelligence issues".[2]

We need to benefit from all previous experience in order to prevent future failures. But it is also safe to understand that not all future events are preventable and not all past occurrences will serve as valuable` lessons. It is also essential to learn from others` experience, without having to suffer its bleak consequences.

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[2] According to the official site of the French diplomacy, *Progress in European projects*, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/european-union/events/ article/progress-in-european-projects-one-year-after-president-macron-s-initiative-for, accessed April 3rd, 2019.

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