Understanding the Intelligence Cycle. Edited by Mark Phythian. New York: Routledge, 2013

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Mark Phythian has recruited the top academics in the Intelligence field to address that never-ending question: How useful is the intelligence cycle?   On the one hand, all of the authors point out that the cycle isn't entirely accurate. It's definitely missing a few steps and/or (depending on one's position in the cycle), simplifying the process. On the other hand, the authors acknowledge that its replacement is far from uniform. The problem is in picking one's poison: inaccuracy or hyper-complexity. If the cycle is too simple to be accurate, then intelligence professionals and observers need an alternative. If the cycle is entirely accurate, then it is likely too complex to be useful. Given the multiple agencies, varied systems, conflicting objectives, and demanding customers across many interested nations, one cycle may not fit all. This book presents more than one replacement — some simpler than others — which is, of course, the problem with which we began.

Understanding the Intelligence Cycle gives readers some background on the choice of metaphors for the cycle, as well as multiple substitute options. The background comes from historian, Michael Warner, who tells us that cycle started when French revolutionaries needed a means to explain intelligence collection to their increasingly specialized military staffs. Indeed, it was the voracious appetite for intelligence during wartime in Europe from the 18th and 19th centuries that moved military organizations to codify their intelligence processes into a flexible yet accurate description of their behavior. Warner asserts that the graphic depiction of a cycle became a popular talisman even as governments moved beyond the simple linear process it described. Omand agrees that the current intelligence cycle may have outlived its usefulness. Its static reflection of the roughly equivalent and stalemated world during the Cold War is outdated. We may want to keep the current cycle, he posits, but it will need to be augmented with situational awareness, explanatory value, prediction, and strategic notice. He submits that these additional complexities will make the cycle more responsive to external demands and changing social attitudes.

As currently used, the Intelligence Cycle is a constant, reiterative, cyclical feedback loop that neatly describes a step-by-step, time consuming process that accommodates the information needs of government decision makers with the capabilities of the providers. It typically has four or five steps involving: 1. Planning, 2. Collection, 3. Processing, 4. Analysis, and 5. Dissemination. In the digital, speedy, information age, when collectors work simultaneously with the analysts, and consumers use and consume more information than ever, Phythian asks how relevant is the cycle. Information has become a firehose, and the cycle can't handle it. Is it time to move beyond the cycle, and what would replace it?

Some authors substitute a web for the cycle. From Gill and Phythian, we learn that the extreme simplicity of the linear cycle is outdated and unhelpful. Intelligence is collected, analyzed, distributed, and used at multiple, complex levels, and the cycle should reflect that modern entanglement with a web. Their web is accurate and complicated, including at one point, no fewer than thirteen caveats, illustrated with no fewer than seventeen arrows, indicating multiple directions and descriptions.

Richards substitutes a Venn Diagram for the cycle. Simplifying the current cycle, he focuses on the two main parts: policymakers and intelligence producers. The diagram compresses collectors and analysts into one side so that we don't need to distinguish raw and finished intelligence. His model focuses on the questions and the answers, arguing that it doesn't need more than that to aid intelligence professionals in their jobs.

Some authors substitute a multi-directional loop for the cycle. This resembles a juggler riding a unicycle while multiple plates whirl about. As the alternative cycles pile up for the reader's consideration, the complexity induces one to wonder whether the cycle is necessary at all. Do we really need a cycle to describe how intelligence works? Might we just be able to collect, disseminate, analyze, and direct intelligence without a graphic depiction of the enterprise? The essay by Davies, Gustafson, and Rigden throws this thought out the window by describing the 2009 UK Ministry of Defence attempt to review the old cycle and create a new, universally acceptable paradigm for joint military use across multiple nations. Their focus on core functions tells us that the process is just as important as the product because the cycle is continuous, not linear. After a lengthy treatment of its advantages and disadvantages, we learn that the 2009 review process stuck with the image of a cycle but added multi-directional arrows and a starburst of feedback and dialogue to more accurately reflect what is happening, as well as what should happen, in the intelligence process.

Brantly's cycle is focused on a new threat: cyber warfare. He argues that the current cycle is defensive and reactionary, and it needs to both push intelligence into the cyber arena and pull intelligence out of it. The resulting need to have an inductive quality prevents the intelligence cycle from enforcing one theoretical approach on all intelligence; it must respond to the new threats.

Sheptycki applies the cycle to another specific area of security: police work. He agrees that the uni-directional nature of the current intelligence cycle hinders the creativity and inductive quality of good policing. Rather than focusing on management guided intelligence collection, or the simplistic equation of threats and responses, policing needs to be oriented around human security.

Strachan-Morris tells us that intelligence in the corporate world tends to reflect business requirements on an "as-needed" basis. Thus, the static

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depiction of our current cycle misses out on relationships; it's not fast enough to assimilate changing needs.

Arthur Hulnick proposes a matrix model with four main tasks: collection, analysis, counterintelligence, and covert action. There are two ways of accomplishing these tasks: process and sequence. Process tells us that intelligence duties are conducted in parallel to each other, not sequentially. Sequence, meanwhile, shows us that none of intelligence works in isolation. All tasks, all processes, are in motion simultaneously. If we cannot incorporate concurrent feedback and influence in our model of intelligence operations, then we are too far removed from reality to be helpful.

Let's return to our original question: How useful is the intelligence cycle to our current operations? To answer that question, if the intelligence cycle is supposed to accurately depict how governments learn and react to new information, then this book tells us that the cycle has to change. If the intelligence cycle is supposed to show how intelligence ought to be collected, analyzed, and disseminated, this book again tells us that the cycle has to change. So, we have to conclude that the cycle is not especially useful, and every author in this book agrees that it needs an overhaul.

To the un-initiated, this book may seem too detailed and arcane. To the intelligence newcomer, it may even appear overly self-absorbed. Indeed, the edited book is accurate, possibly to point of tedium. Understanding the intelligence cycle is a central question in academic circles, and this book is right there in the middle of the literature, but does it need to be so detailed? Phythian thinks so, and this book accurately reflects the debates, alternatives, second thoughts, regrets, and hopes that intelligence observers — both inside and outside government — have pinned on the intelligence cycle and its alternatives. Ultimately, though, it falls short of offering a universal conclusion as to what to do next.

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