A Day in the Life of an NSA Intelligence Analyst

There are so many flavors of intelligence analyst (IA) at the NSA, depending on what special skills one may have developed during his/her time at the Agency and the particular needs of the mission one's office covers. My particular team's mission focuses on North Korea. (https://www.dni.gov/index.php/ncpc-features/1551-features-3)

One of the best things about my job as an IA is that my day is never the same twice--no Groundhog's Day syndrome here! However, it makes it somewhat difficult to outline my typical day. This is what most days entail:

0630: I start my days early, that is my choice. As an Agency employee, I have the privilege of setting the work day hours that work for me. Work-life balance is really emphasized, so this allows me to be home when my family is home, too. Like many other jobs, my day starts with a review of what's in my email inbox. On a typical day, what is in the inbox dictates how the rest of my day goes, and if I will have additional tasks to complete that day. Tasks often fall to IAs out of a lack of anywhere else to send them. Some are complex and others take only a few minutes to complete. Incoming emails throughout the day can make or break my schedule.

0730: Review requests from IC customers. There are two portals through which customers can ask for information, or for permission to disseminate information further, or to request the classification of a report be downgraded. Due to my team's niche reporting, we seldom have a day when there are no requests. Some requests are more involved than others, and others are a simple yes or no answer. Requests for downgrades to UNCLASSIFIED require additional levels of review.

The majority of requests are for permission to include part of a report in an all-source publication. For our team, the requests generally come from the State Department, CIA, and the Department of the Treasury. The follow-on publication can be destined for a number of customers: foreign governments and liaison services, U.S. Congressional Committees, and even the public. One of the most exciting parts of my job is to see IC customers take action because of the information in our reports, and knowing that we are hindering the adversary's efforts and making a difference.

0800: Auditing. Querying is serious business at the Agency and the queries conducted by analysts of all types are audited. If you have access to a repository of data, you are likely also an auditor for others. Being an auditor requires that you complete the requisite training, understand query structure and the auditee's mission. For this reason, auditors are not allowed to audit queries outside their office's scope of mission. How long this takes depends on how busy the analysts who I audit were the previous day. Each analyst is required to have two auditors assigned to him/her, in the event that one is out on any particular day. Without two auditors, the system will not allow the analyst to conduct any queries.

0830: As a senior IA, I also have the responsibility for editing and publishing reports. Because of the strict integrity standards the team adheres to, I'm allowed to be the editor or releaser, but not both. Releasers are required to have more experience and training, so there are fewer of them. For this reason, I usually fulfill the releaser role. Depending on how productive the other IAs on the team were, this could take somewhere between 30 minutes to 2 hours or more.

As part of my job as a senior IA, it is also my responsibility to provide mentoring to the more junior analysts on the team. While edits and suggestions can be made online in the report authoring tools, I prefer to do it desk side for a number of reasons, but primarily because I find that a 2-way conversation provides a more memorable training experience.

Of utmost importance is to ensure that the ODNI Analytic Integrity Standards (AIS) are followed. These standards are applicable through the entire analytic process, from data collection to analysis presentation. The division's reports are spot checked to ensure adherence, and since the releaser is the last set of eyes on a report before publication, it's the releaser who answers to the division's senior reporting authority when errors are made.

1100: Finally, if all goes well until this point, I can look at what my actual workflow looks like with regard to analyzing new information. Because the team uses a workflow management tool, it is easy to see what everyone is working on, the various stages items are in, and what needs to be completed. Work items are re-assigned as they are processed through the workflow. Each IA is assigned to particular areas, so I look at what has been assigned to me, typically by the language analysts. Since translations are only one source of data, it's my responsibility to search other repositories for related data. While some requirements come in from customers via the request portals, there are also standing requirements submitted by the IC that the team constantly focuses on. The work items are prioritized in accordance with the priority they garner in the standing requirements, and are reflected in the work items within the workflow management tool, assisting the analyst judgment as to how quickly an item should be processed.

Taking all this into account, I determine which reporting vehicle should be used, how fast it should be processed, who my collaborators are, what type of research methodology should be used, and should I tip the activity to my management chain if I think it's a particularly hot or controversial item.

The majority of the information our team processes is relatively black and white and often doesn't require much in the way of analyzing for reasons I can't include here. However, occasionally we will see something that just doesn't make sense based on the behavior we usually see. The first thing we do is bring in the language analysts to ensure we are interpreting the translation accurately. Oftentimes things can get lost in translation and it usually just takes a simple explanation to clear it up. However, we sometimes see things that are anomalies.

The team almost never has a complete data set related to an activity or event, so we must do our best to fill in the gaps and figure out what is happening. We first start with a team brainstorming session to discuss possible scenarios and review any recent reporting and database entries. Since my team is a transnational issue-centric office, we reach out to the regional office to see if anyone is aware of the activity and knows why it's occurring. We also work closely with other IC partners, so we often reach out to them for participation. They are sometimes aware of things we're not for a number of reasons like their agency's report has not yet been published, or there is a clearance or access issue and our team was not privy to the information.

> As you can see, there are a number of issues already: too many analysts working the same issue from different places, and not having access to all the data. Some clearances are billeted, meaning there are a limited number of slots for access that are shared among the IC. OK, back to my day.

Time is also another issue. Generally, anomalies and other issues need to be resolved as quickly as possible. Tipping an item--publishing a short item similar to a Tweet--only buys a little bit of time; the full story needs to be published very soon thereafter. Because our team is composed of members of varying ages, education, and background, brainstorming works very well for us. We have ages ranging from 21 to 60, members with master's degrees and some without degrees at all, heritage and non-native speakers of several different languages, military, former military and civilians. This diversity allows the problem to be worked from different perspectives, and speaking our minds is always encouraged. Some of the most insightful comments have been from our youngest team member. Nine times out of 10, brainstorming works for us.

The team's brainstorming sessions are held in a "cave" containing a white board. The team lead, together with the team member who discovered the anomaly, explains the problem to the group (sometimes includes more than just the team). The group members discuss the problem, and assumptions about what could be happening are written on the white board. The next step is to take a look at the assumptions, challenge them, and take a close look at the outliers. The group members are hyper-aware that North Koreans do not act like everyone else, and for this reason, brainstorming sessions can take on some of the characteristics of a red hat exercise.

After eliminating those assumptions that are the least plausible, the group moves to the key assumptions check phase of the session in an effort to fill in any information gaps that exist, and they almost always exist. Occasionally, the group will conduct a chronological review of events to figure out if there were indicators we missed that triggered this anomalous event. About a quarter of the time this works, and this is most likely due to a data processing latency problem, or a simple miscommunication about who was responsible for processing.

If no conclusion is reached about the anomaly, usually the next option is an informal scenarios analysis exercise. Similar to brainstorming, for our team, this includes more subject matter experts and more documentation. North Korea is famous for being unpredictable which makes these exercises even more challenging (and fun!) It also allows for playing devil's advocate to rule out scenarios that seem highly implausible, as well as drafting the report in a way that tells the customer, “This is what we’re seeing, and here are the possible explanations.” During my time on the team, there have been no anomalies that were so complex in nature that we were unable to reach a conclusion.

Once the conclusion is drawn and the report is drafted, it goes through a rigorous coordination and editing process. Drafts are first coordinated internally to ensure that everything discussed was accurately represented. If the draft has issues, it is a good time for mentoring! After the first round of editing, the draft is then coordinated with the geo-centric office and any other offices upon which the topic might touch. This is done for several reasons, primarily for awareness and for an equity check. Equities are generally close hold and not widely known, so the coordination serves as a way to notify an office that may have an equity concern.

After the draft has been coordinated, it is edited by a more experienced analyst, and then passed to the releaser for publication. This entire process can take anywhere from an hour to more than a day depending on the priority, level of complexity, and the amount of time and resources for processing and reviewing.

While there are many challenges as you can see, there are also many rewards. We built a great team dynamic that enables us to pull together when needed. When we answer customer questions that enable them to take action is the most rewarding of all. Our niche mission makes us special and we take a lot of pride in that.