

# **International Trade and Commerce**

## **Search Strategies for Intelligence Production**

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The buzzwords of global trade are all around us: trade deficits, trade barriers, most favored nation, tariffs, anti-dumping, piracy, or unfair trade practices. This fall we shall hear of the President's request for fast track authority to negotiate trade treaties, and of an effort in the Senate to limit unilateral trade sanctions.

Global economic competition is fierce, if not brutal, among traditional trading partners and newly emerging nations. It seems clear that the intelligence community, should it forge stronger alliances with private industry, will have an increasing role in promoting free trade. Senator Dennis DeConcini, writing in the Journal of International Affairs (Summer 1994), commented that the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence heard testimony in 1993 suggesting that "intelligence agencies should attempt to identify violations of U.S. intellectual property rights by the industries of other countries, document the failure of other countries to comply with trade agreements that ensure access by U.S. firms to their markets, and track efforts to circumvent U.S. import restrictions."

A knowledge of the governmental and commercial infrastructures that support international trade is imperative; the details of their operating mechanisms are endless. Today I want to enlarge your knowledge of open source materials and gray literature in international trade and commerce, and to suggest strategies that will render you a more efficient researcher.

I'm aware that the research skills of folks in the room are diverse: some of you have extensive experience with mining on-line databases and the Internet, others have traditionally relied on print materials, on personal information networks, or on materials supplied by information specialists. You may be veterans of international trade research, or here to learn the basic tools. Whatever your background, I'd like you to review with me the traditional research methodologies and its expensive tools, the "free" Internet and its attendant frustrations, and the sources to tap that are more subtle and round out the third leg of our research tripod.

Prodigious notetaking won't be necessary... you will be able to pick up a guide to sources at the end of today's session; my remarks will serve as a general overview, the handout is source specific.

I was recently asked to fashion a research methodology to survey Iranian naval acquisitions over the past three years, paying particular attention to submersible vehicles,

mini-sub, modern submarine technology and underwater Special Forces and Frogman gear.

One quickly gleans, from U.S. and international press reports, that Iran has determined to control the Persian Gulf, as well as the Strait of Hormuz, which links the Gulf of Oman with the Persian Gulf. With an armada of submersible craft, Iran could thus control the passage of oil tankers in the region, and have the ability to attack oil rigs in the area.

Let's list first the kinds of open source materials we might expect to find in various media:

- newspaper and newsletter articles will tell of recent Iranian purchases of submarines from Russia
- speeches, commentary, or reports on these purchases from U.S. defense circles
- indigenous press reports (possibly in English, more likely written in Persian, Turkic and Kurdish)
- listservs, newsgroups and bulletin boards devoted to discussions from all parts of the globe regarding Iran's military or economic capacities
- Internet links to sites in Iran and elsewhere that could be used as listening posts
- directories of Iranian businesses
- descriptions of arms bazaars or trade shows where Iran might be purchasing its naval stores
- identification of manufacturers of frogman gear
- customs manifests that would show imports and exports of this type of equipment
- background information on the history of the manufacturers, as well as biographical sketches of their principals
- identification of Iran watchers from government, academic, legal, journalistic, or business circles
- identification of academic centers that specialize in Iranian or Middle Eastern studies and would have special library resources
- maps of Iran and the Persian Gulf
- identification of Iranian scientists, in-country and abroad, who regularly discuss subjects of mutual interest, and
- materials from various U.S. and other government agencies that offer detailed descriptions on the business climate and practices in a given country... all of these elements must be identified and analyzed to complete the mosaic that is formed at the conclusion of any research project.

Leonard Fuld, in The New Competitor Intelligence, (Wiley, 1995), advises that in developing international research strategies, one should be aware of the "Ripple Effect Law," to wit: "Information is most available at its source and becomes less available the farther it travels away from that source." Additionally, Fuld defines the "Intelligence Antennas Law," based on the observation that "each country or region has a set of

intelligence antennas that act as information magnets and are superior in picking up and absorbing information in that country or region.”

If one chooses to create an “Intelligence Map,” as Fuld advises, to receive the appropriate intelligence signals, or simply use one’s own checklist of items to be ticked, the focused, informed search will yield the richest results in the least time. Remember, however, that one strategy will not fit all topics; the researcher’s versatility, creativity and knowledge base all contribute to the creation of each new map.

With antennas fully extended, let us examine more closely the strategies that could be followed to complete the task at hand, or any assignment involving international trade and commerce.

First, we should know who the experts are. From their knowledge or databanks we can access information involving international trade statistics, treaties, sanctions, forecasts, exchange rates, anti-dumping issues, import-export news and statistics, cross-border investment, emerging market indicators, trade leads, “how to do business in...[country],” statutory law, regulatory materials, backgrounders on commercial practices in specific countries, speeches, congressional testimony, and unfair trade practices.

Mining the experts is our first tool to obtain elusive materials; remember the first rule in data gathering: “Don’t duplicate research already done, by government agencies, private vendors, academics, trade associations, centers for special studies, or think tanks.” As a rule, this advice doesn’t roll trippingly off the tongue, but it should be engraved in one’s subconscious.

International trade is obviously a driver for economic development, and it can also be a weapon or a bargaining wedge wielded by one nation against another. Government agencies worldwide are the greatest repository of trade information; data is available in abundance, especially on the Internet (for the countries with the most mature telecommunications infrastructures), but you might consider trying to cultivate experts in embassies, trade missions or commerce departments in specific countries, and to understand the relationships between governmental bureaucracies among trading nations.

Once alert to the experts, one turns to news sources, including newspapers, newsletters, wires, magazines, transcripts of radio and television broadcasts, editorial and op-ed opinions. In addition to keeping abreast of events in a given locale, these sources can help identify journalists or editors who are experts in-country or in a given field (adding to your expert list), and allow one to examine speeches and activities of politicians, economists and trade representatives that could possibly contribute to backgrounders for trade negotiations. The careful researcher is also able to maintain current data on world financial markets, as pressures on currencies and stock markets are often indications of a country’s economic stability, as recently demonstrated in Thailand.

Many of the research tools allow news scans by individual country, as well as by region. It should be noted that a number of Internet directories contain links to thousands of news organs; as the less developed countries add telecommunications capabilities, the numbers will grow. The commercial on-line databases maintained by Dialog, DataStar, and Lexis-Nexis are ever more densely populated by foreign language publications; the Internet sources are frequently published only in the indigenous language, thus requiring the researcher to be multi-lingual, or have a translator handy in human or machine form.

One step down from traditional news sources are the Internet's gifts to ephemera, or, one might pun, "tattle-tale gray literature." These are the listservs, newsgroups, mailing lists and bulletin boards. They are useful in obtaining trade leads, news of import-export activities, adherence to -- or disregard of -- sanctions and treaties, market movements and ongoing trade research. Experts and consultants on a given topic can be identified from these sources; additionally, the subscriber can either observe or participate in moderated discussions. If you belong to listservs, you also know that many are populated with folks who are underemployed or pompous to the extreme; watch out of bias and misinformation at these sources. From these listening posts one can gather the first inklings of news, speculation, gossip, opinion or conjecture; the exchanges of information can also be used to verify or question the validity of materials posted on these sites or published in the world media. Finally, they can be exploited for subscriptions to newsletters and trade news.

It should be noted that while there is valuable information to be exchanged, and, perhaps more interestingly, lots to be tucked away from lurking on listservs, the fact remains that keeping up with this medium is extremely time-consuming...and can be an utter bore, unless you can meld your knowledge and creativity and patience to make sense of the whole. Given the right combination of language skills and subject expertise, the searcher could make critical identifications of people or events that have the potential to threaten a given economic order.

Trade shows offer another abundant open source for commercial intelligence. They serve as a first alert to who is selling what to whom... and where... and why. Often they provide the testing ground for new technologies and products, new markets, industry trends and growth prospects. Imagine, for instance, what one could learn about OSS 97 and the interests of the intelligence community by looking at its Web site. At these bazaars one can identify industry leaders (and wannabes), observe the forming of strategic alliances, analyze competitors' stances and strengths in the market, and collect literature and price comparisons. Most trade shows take place outside the United States, but, with the advent of the Internet, one can identify them by product, by country, by date or by sponsor.

Companies that go to extremes to protect their competitive posture year round will suddenly be ready to divulge reams of information about new products and their attendant marketing plans at trade shows. Increasingly, these shows have individual Internet

locations; there is even one enterprise that plans to mount “virtual” trade shows, complete with catalogs and companies’ literature mounted on the site.

Business directories and trade leads offer additional antennas for reception of pertinent information. Access to these materials can furnish data on companies by name, address, principals, product, industry, and SIC codes. Additionally, directories can enable one to ferret out corporate affiliations, to produce industry profiles for competitor intelligence, and to identify products that are offered for sale or that are being sought for purchase.

Dialog databases from Kompass and Dun & Bradstreet have traditionally been the most comprehensive repository for determining company locations and kinships, country-specific directories are appearing more frequently at indigenous Internet sites. It is still necessary, however, to depend on print directories in many parts of the world.

Trade leads are just what the name implies...an advertisement by a company or government for goods it has for sale or for products or services it would like to buy. A watch on these products or services could quickly identify an unexpected flow of goods from one locale to another.

I have mentioned the Internet frequently during these remarks; its usefulness in capturing open source materials for research in global trade becomes more astounding every day. Many approach the WWW either with fear and trembling, or with the supreme confidence that they will zero in on a wealth of information immediately...or with the hope they’ll land somewhere in between. The complaint we hear most frequently from surfers who have little research experience concerns the unmanageable volume of material they summon from a Yahoo or an Alta Vista search. The irritant to most information professionals is the claim that everything is on the Net, free, and that no additional research tools are needed.

I’ve prepared a page for the handout that leads to several excellent articles describing the differences between search engines and subject guides, to allow the searcher to obtain the most focused results; additionally, they will provide guidance on how to evaluate information retrieved from the WWW, and how to become familiar with search engine logic, syntax, and relevancy ranking. Once you’re in a site that looks promising, explore and drill down as far as feasible for information that may not be apparent at the top level. And, we hope, you can become such an Internet expert that you will know when to pull the plug and turn to fee-based databases, print sources, and the experts you’ve cultivated throughout your career.

At the risk of sounding like a superannuated hippie, I urge you to “question authority” when striking out on the Internet; look for the authority at the site... is it a stellar university department, a government agency, or a sophomore fulfilling a course requirement? With the Internet, you get what you pay for. When you need definitive materials quickly there’s no substitute for the depth, richness, variety and validity of

products from the Economist Intelligence Unit or STAT-USA; many of these sources are highlighted in the handout.

There are several approaches to Internet searching that are usually not covered in the search engine surveys and comparisons. One is the use of agents that will cluster similar Internet sites and organize and rank them on the fly, then, at set intervals, revisit the WWW to pick up anything new that's popped up since the original search. Another item that warrants our attention is the ability of search engines like HotBot to allow searching on domain names, in combination with country codes (ISO 3600), to select sets of information that the researcher might want to mine. One could quickly determine the kinds of sites available from Zaire, for example, by using its country code and the domains .mil, .gov, .edu, .com, etc. Be aware, though, that domain name abbreviations can vary with the different languages.

Our own company has created a unique Internet research tool. In 1996 and 1997 IIA undertook two projects for a government agency to capture and exploit Internet sites to serve the research needs of the intelligence community. First, subject specialists were hired with a variety of linguistic skills. Then we utilized specially created search strategies with automated search engines; the results were presented in MARC format, conforming to Internet cataloging methodologies. Last, we added LC subject headings and a classification of descriptive terms of interest to the client. We were thus able to create a database of Internet sites that could be visited repeatedly for updates at significant South American and the Middle Eastern sites. In other words, we produced a virtual Internet reference library, with conventional catalog access, that the client could use to handle large volumes of information, in a most timely manner.

The caveats in relying on the WWW are, as stated above, the difficulty in finding relevant information quickly, the realization that sites here today can be gone tomorrow, the fact that there are a number of dead or dated URLs that are useless, and the knowledge that the Internet offers vast opportunities for the dissemination of biased or inaccurate data.

To conclude, on a more cheerful (and positive) Internet note, I'll revisit several of the antennae employed to gather information for the Iran project.

An investigation of naval acquisitions began with what is known about relatively recent purchases of underwater gear. Domestic and international newspaper articles and newsletters were found through commercial online databases; From papers as diverse as the New York Times and Washington Post to the Dallas Morning News and Middle East Economic Digest, stories on the topic have circulated since 1994.

After confirming that Russia had indeed sold a number of submarines to Iran, we turned to the experts at Michigan State University's "International Business Resources on the WWW," and to the National Air Intelligence Center's "Web Navigator," where we searched the term "Iran." Presto! Immediately we found links to Iranian news agencies and newspapers, business directories and guides to doing business in Iran, trade shows,

Iranian and Middle Eastern Studies centers at Stanford, the University of Texas, and the Australian National University. If one's intelligence map, or checklist, suggests you call an expert first, you're in the starting block.

One might now want to start tapping into newsgroups and listservs for the exchange of information about Iranian military or government interests in undersea equipment; as we became submerged in the topic, news stories referred to a trade show, IDEX, the 1997 International Defense Exhibition held in Saudi Arabia in March. Several stories featured the Iranian/Russian trading relationship. IDEX has its own home page on the WWW; the "exhibitors" page was not found, but, with patience, one could scroll through 500 "exhibits," arranged alphabetically by company, and find submersible equipment, mines, missiles and other accessories of war listed under the "products" column for each company. When the IDEX site was visited recently, the "exhibits" link had disappeared, indicating again the instability of the Web as a source for gray literature.

Additional vendors could be located by obtaining the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) code for all products relating to oceanographic equipment, diving, underwater sports, and mine warfare equipment; these Code numbers could be run through Dialog's D & B Market Identifier databases worldwide to add to the list of companies; once the dealers list has been compiled, their export activities could be tracked through Dialog's PIERS database (for U.S. exports only); and, finally, all of the appropriate open sources could be examined for corporate data on each of the vendors. Many pieces of the mosaic are now in place to begin an analysis of recent Iranian naval acquisitions.

Today we have touched upon a variety strategies for researching international trade and commerce; our challenge, as with any topic requiring research and analysis, is to master the basic tools, to keep up with the cascade of new ones as they become available, to remember the research tripod envisioned at the beginning... take maximum advantage of the commercial sources, the Internet, and the strata of not-so-obvious trade and commercial materials... and to be as nimble and creative as feasible in our approaches to any given subject. The handouts we've prepared will serve as a primer for your forays into what some observers claim will be the most challenging world arena for many years to come.

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