

Speech Abstract: "FBIS 1995-1998: Transition and Transformation"

presented by

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About three years ago, FBIS introduced the first in a series of strategic changes to its operations, workforce, and product and services. The initial shift occurred in 1995 when FBIS declared the goal of becoming within one year a softcopy product enterprise. This followed a 50-year history of a predominantly hardcopy product line. By September 1996, FBIS had put into operation several online outlets for its products (although these early prototypes were only capable of once-a-day updates). Roughly 6 months later, in spring of 1997, the FBIS online sites were upgraded to near-real-time entry of new reports; i.e., items from FBIS's foreign and domestic production units could enter the sites within 30 minutes of release. Finally, in June 1997, FBIS retired the last of its hardcopy publications when the final S&T Perspectives volume was released. To be sure, the changeover from a hardcopy product did not meet with universal acclaim. There were (and still are) a number of customers who regretted seeing the end of FBIS's "books." But the imperatives of automation, efficiency, and product improvement proved irresistible.

The foregoing could be described as the first substantial repositioning of FBIS in the 1990's. To achieve this scope of change, broad reengineering was required across FBIS. The transformation of the FBIS workforce and the shifts in emphasis which have occurred in FBIS products and services have been especially striking. With the end to FBIS's hardcopy DAILY REPORTS came the demise of a whole set of time-honored processes: the rush to meet publication deadlines, the laboring over individual page layouts, and the elaborate editorial style guides have given way to a new set of tasks, skills, and procedures associated with the electronic product.

These days an FBIS officer is as likely to be valued for Internet proficiency as for mastery of a foreign language. The skills needed to organize effective work efforts across great distances and with a diverse mix of in-house, overseas, and contractor staffs is as highly valued as leadership of a conventional FBIS division. The ability to use the best practices of the private sector -- benchmarking, performance measurement, customer orientation -- is being inculcated in every FBIS officer, regardless of whether he or she performs as a manager. The emergence of these new capabilities and attributes is not eclipsing FBIS's past specialties -- linguistic, operational, and substantive expertise are as prominent in the FBIS environment as ever. The difference is that today's FBIS officer is much less likely to be a "single-threaded" expert, but probably has achieved or is working toward mastery of several disciplines.

The product mix has changed as well. Although it is best known for its transcriptions and translations of foreign media reportage, FBIS is devoting increasing attention to value-added products. For example, FBIS's output of Foreign Media Notes (FMN) -- concise and time-sensitive summaries of key

foreign events -- has more than doubled in the last two years. FMN's are given wide circulation in the intelligence and defense communities, but are aimed especially at "answering the mail" -- usually on a short fuse -- of U.S. policymakers and their staffs. These personnel and product innovations represent a sharp departure from just a few years ago and demonstrate how FBIS, with or without the vagaries of budget allocations, is seeking to become more efficient, more responsive, and more agile.

So what does today's transformation portend for FBIS's future? Among other things, an unrelenting focus not only on our customers' specific requirements, but on their overall information environments. In the coming years, the bulk of our increasingly interconnected customers likely will express the need for even faster turnaround and greater sophistication in finished products (especially multimedia). Another key consideration for FBIS is that its traditional information "feedstocks" -- the often obscure and out-of-reach broadcasts, publications, and press agencies scattered around the world -- are becoming, in an Internet age, less and less exotic and inaccessible. One upshot of this is FBIS may well find a growing business imperative to strike up alliances and partnerships with other open source providers -- inside and outside of government -- so that the collection and delivery to customers of open source information can be done by the most economic and efficient means possible.

As raw open source information becomes more accessible, we foresee a need not only for more value-added processing of that material, but also for authoritative insights and reporting on the information sources themselves. In that connection, FBIS is building a worldwide data collection and archiving system known as MediaNet which is designed to capture background information for FBIS source assessments, and also to serve as a product outlet for U.S. Government customers who choose to make direct use of MediaNet databases.

We look forward to continuous improvements to FBIS's offerings, including the introduction in 2000 and beyond of multimedia and vernacular products in the FBIS online sites. Organizationally, the multidisciplinary team will continue to expand and become the predominant feature of the FBIS workforce structure. Risk management (sted risk aversion) will be the prevailing logic of our strategic planning and tactical implementation. Our intent is to remain what we always have been -- the preeminent provider of foreign media information to the Intelligence Community. The opportunities afforded by technology, by the transformation of our workforce and work processes, and by the global proliferation of open information are what we will capitalize on in pursuing that goal.

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