



THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN HUMINT

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ABSTRACT

Communication skills are crucial for Human Intelligence (HUMINT) operations, helping build trust, understand behaviors, and adapt to cultural and situational differences. Drawing on theoretical research on HUMINT evolution, the article analyzes how these skills have evolved alongside changes in operational and technological environments. Using a case study of HUMINT in Afghanistan, the research employs evolutionary analysis to track how communication skills have adapted to instability and cultural complexity. Findings show that HUMINT effectiveness depends on agents blending traditional interaction skills with new technologies. Communication skills become a strategic tool in turning raw data into valuable intelligence. The article emphasizes the need for ongoing skill development to meet modern security challenges.

Keywords: communication skills, HUMINT, intelligence, efficiency, evolution.

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Introduction

Communication is the foundation of intelligence gathering activities through Human Intelligence (HUMINT). In this field, it is not just the raw information that matters, but also how it is obtained, processed, and transmitted, making communication skills vital in the intelligence cycle. Each stage of this process relies on the intelligence agent's ability to build relationships, read behavior, exploit vulnerabilities, and tailor messages to the context.

This article examines the significance of these skills in streamlining HUMINT intelligence-gathering operations and analyzes their development over the decades, from traditional to modern methods. In the context of globalization, characterized by informational advances and asymmetric warfare, the ability to adapt and integrate is essential for refining intelligence collection techniques. To emphasize the importance of this topic, the article offers a detailed analysis of communication skills in HUMINT, focusing on interactions that foster trust and on transforming raw data into information relevant to decision-makers. Therefore, continuous improvement of communication skills is no longer just a professional necessity but has become an essential part of obtaining information from human sources.

I. HUMINT and the role of communication skills

I.1. The basics of HUMINT

HUMINT is the collection of information through direct interaction with human beings, whether they are sources, informants, or persons of interest. Unlike technical methods (SIGINT, MASINT, IMINT, etc.), HUMINT relies on relationships, communication, and interpreting human behavior. According to Byman (2014), HUMINT refers to information obtained directly from people. The author stresses that "HUMINT essentially means any information that comes from a human being. This includes, first and foremost, classic espionage—a human agent infiltrating another organization, be it a state or a terrorist group" (Byman, 2014, p. 15). However, gathering information through HUMINT is not limited to classic sources, but "the information comes from human sources, and the public often associates this type of information gathering with clandestine activities" (Lewis, 2004, p. 176). From

these definitions, it follows that HUMINT is discreet and risky by nature, relying on direct interactions and understanding human behavior.

Information is "raw or unprocessed data that, through processing and analysis, becomes intelligence" (Jensen, McElreath & Graves, 2021, p. 6). From this perspective, we can say that information, in its initial form, is not useful until it undergoes evaluation and interpretation. Mark M. Lowenthal states that "information becomes intelligence only when it is collected, evaluated, and integrated into a context that gives it meaning" (Lowenthal, 2017, p. 10). Therefore, transforming raw information into intelligence is essential to providing decision-makers with relevant, actionable data, and HUMINT is at the heart of the intelligence cycle.

I.2. Communication skills in the context of HUMINT

Communication skills are a complex concept with many components. We can say that "the essence of communication skills is the ability to organize speech activities according to specific communication tasks and situations, based on acquired knowledge and abilities" (Babaniyazova, 2019, p. 162). Therefore, from this perspective, we could define communication skills as the sum of abilities and knowledge, but this definition does not fully capture the complexity of the concept itself.

Also, to define communication skills more precisely, we will link them with related terms like efficiency and appropriateness, considering that "efficiency describes the result of communication skills, while appropriateness links it to the situational conditions of real social interaction" (Rickheit & Strohner, 2008, p. 15). Therefore, communication skills are not just about conveying a message clearly but also about adjusting it to the context in which communication occurs.

In HUMINT, communication skills are more accurately described as "the appropriate ability to convey ideas to others through speech or writing" (McCroskey, 1984, p. 265). Therefore, they become essential to intelligence gathering operations, as the success of missions relies on the relationships established with human sources, as well as on the effectiveness and appropriateness of communication. The ability to build trusting relationships, listen actively, and understand both the spoken words and subtle cues in the source's behavior is critical for operational success. These communication skills can be learned and improved through education and practice. Operational officers are trained not only in

espionage techniques but also in managing complex social interactions, understanding cultural and psychological variables, and employing effective strategies of influence and persuasion.

II. The evolution of communication skills in HUMINT

II.1. Methods of gathering information in the Roman Empire

Traditional methods of gathering information rely on direct contact between the agent and the source, using communication and psychological techniques to collect information. Supporting this principle, we see that "HUMINT involves personal meetings between the agent and the source, requires excellent communication skills and the ability to build trust in hostile environments" (Department of the Army, U.S. Army Intelligence Activities Regulation, 2007). According to the U.S. Army Intelligence Activities Regulations (2007), the most essential traditional methods are: interviews, which involve gathering information through structured conversations; interrogations, which include obtaining information from captured individuals; personal observation, where agents monitor the behavior and interactions of sources; and recruitment operations, through which human sources are attracted to provide information.

HUMINT activities date back to ancient Rome, when information gathering relied entirely on human interactions due to the lack of advanced technologies and resources. "In ancient Rome, in the absence of modern technologies and sophisticated information resources, the process of gathering information was based almost exclusively on human interactions, and the movement of information depended on the movement of people" (Bartolini, 2021). In this setting, individuals from different social levels—merchants, messengers, travelers, or ordinary citizens—were part of informal espionage networks, operating under various covers to gather data about adversaries, troop movements, and the political situation in controlled or targeted areas.

HUMINT was a key part of Rome's survival and expansion strategy. The Roman Empire understood

early on the importance of information gathered through human interactions, using spies and informants—known as *delatores*—to observe both external and internal threats. The Romans relied on human agents to gather information on "enemy troop movements, the loyalty of local leaders, and possible internal conspiracies" (Sheldon, 2005, p. 7). However, these agents' activities were not limited to the battlefield; they were also tasked with "surveillance of political rivals and prevention of revolts" (Charles University, 2023, p. 23).

After conquering the East, the Roman Empire increased its use of civilian human sources. The captured lands were "soon filled with Roman merchants, land speculators, tax collectors, and agents of Roman financial magnates" (Charles University, 2023, p. 27). These seemingly harmless individuals carried out covert intelligence-gathering missions, blending into local communities to collect data without raising suspicion.

Therefore, since ancient times, HUMINT has shown that the success of intelligence operations relies not only on opportunity but mainly on the agents' ability to communicate effectively, build trusting relationships, and interpret the behavioral nuances of their interlocutors.

II.2. The transformation of communication skills in the technological age

In today's technological era, communication skills have evolved significantly and are used not only for constructive purposes but also to exploit social engineering attacks.

Social engineering is a tactic used by individuals or groups to manipulate and deceive others into disclosing sensitive information or taking actions that compromise their security. It depends more on psychology and human behavior than on technical skills (National Cyber Security Directorate, n.d.). This approach emphasizes human vulnerabilities in facing modern threats. Joshua Spark R. Cruz explains: "Social engineering is a form of cybercrime used by hackers to collect confidential information, which can target anyone from a single person to a large business. Once this information is obtained, social engineers can use it to blackmail the target or for their own purposes, whatever those may be" (Joshua Spark R. Cruz, 2017). Therefore, social engineering acts as an information-gathering tool, focused solely on achieving its specific goals.

Moreover, we learn from Ratliff (2014) that "social

engineering is the art of gaining trust or acceptance to convince someone to provide information or take action for the benefit of the attacker" (p. 45). Last but not least, social engineering has a persuasive character, relying on specialized communication skills to obtain information from the chosen target.

III. The role of communication in HUMINT operations – lessons from Afghanistan

HUMINT operations in Afghanistan have undergone continuous evolution in information gathering methods, influenced by technological advances and the ever-changing geopolitical landscape. These operations represent an emerging model of shifting from traditional adversary-focused intelligence gathering to one that incorporates social, multimedia, and political aspects. Initially, intelligence gathering in this theater relied on traditional HUMINT techniques, but over time, more modern strategies were adopted in line with technological developments. Early methods centered on direct interactions between agents and sources to obtain information. Technological progress has led to the incorporation of new techniques—"the communication skills of HUMINT agents have expanded beyond face-to-face interactions to now include complex techniques of influence through digital media" (Washington Institute, 2009). Furthermore, the transformation of intelligence officers to operate both in the field and digital environments signifies a significant shift in communication strategies. This includes face-to-face interactions with sources, exploitation of social networks, use of digital and multimedia platforms for influence, and analysis of the political context to inform strategic decisions.

Afghanistan can be seen as a "laboratory" for developing and adapting HUMINT intelligence gathering methods. The lessons learned since operations began have significantly influenced how intelligence efforts are carried out, leading to a shift toward using advanced systems to improve efficiency and success. "In Afghanistan, the success of HUMINT has depended on integrating new technologies into traditional strategies, thus adapting to the complexity of the conflict" (GlobalSecurity review, 2019). This integration was achieved by adapting verbal and physical communication techniques to digital media, such as social media platforms, where direct contact with sources or gathering information about them proved effective and low-risk. "The role of communication

skills has expanded to include not only direct interaction with sources, but also the massive manipulation and interpretation of data from digital media" (Small Wars Journal, 2010). According to Small Wars Journal (2010), HUMINT agents' communication skills have grown considerably, extending beyond direct interactions. Today, they use digital media to collect additional information and influence behavior, which diminishes the risks of physical contact and boosts operational efficiency. "The most important source of information comes from the local population, not from interceptions or technical surveillance, and to be successful, the intelligence community must develop deep and lasting relationships with it" (Flynn et al., 2010). The local population is the most valuable information source, and the success of operations hinges on establishing strong, enduring relationships with it.

Another crucial element observed in the field was the ability of HUMINT officers to manage intercultural communication in environments marked by suspicion, collective trauma, and language barriers. In many cases, officers had to quickly understand cultural norms, nonverbal language, and social hierarchies so as not to compromise their interaction with sources. This cultural intelligence, combined with empathetic and adaptable communication, enabled the building of lasting relationships with the local population. The result was not only the acquisition of timely information but also the development of a steady flow of data, supported by mutual trust and carefully cultivated loyalty. A fundamental aspect of communication in HUMINT operations in Afghanistan was the ability to influence and shape the social environment in favor of coalition forces. This was achieved by identifying so-called "anchor points"—that is, individuals, tensions, or social dynamics that could be used to fracture popular support for the Taliban. For example, in a district in Helmand, analysts discovered that elders were dissatisfied with the Taliban "threatening their traditional authority structure" (Flynn et al., 2010, p. 14) by placing young fighters and religious leaders in key social roles. Exploiting this discontent allowed US forces to support the re-establishment of the traditional local council and thus significantly reduce insurgent activity. This type of intervention clearly reflects the application of social engineering principles for strategic purposes—identifying influential leaders, analyzing vulnerabilities, and persuading key groups to shift the local power dynamics. Direct interaction with the local population, Afghan partners, and NGOs is essential for verifying and contextualizing information. In this sense, communication is no longer a secondary tool but becomes the core of any effective intelligence operation.

Moreover, cooperation between military structures and non-state actors, such as local leaders, requires refined diplomatic skills. Communication is not only used to gather information but also to prevent conflicts from escalating and to strengthen tactical partnerships. In a fluid environment like Afghanistan, every word, gesture, or communication decision could tip the balance between cooperation and hostility.

Combining agents' technical skills with the ability to build relationships, interpret behavior, and understand human psychology led to a better grasp of local dynamics and the identification of local leaders. Therefore, continuously adapting communication skills was crucial for operational success.

Conclusion

This article emphasizes the critical role of communication skills in HUMINT intelligence gathering operations, beginning with their theoretical foundation and culminating in their practical application in a specific operational setting, such as the theater of operations in Afghanistan. The case study results demonstrated that, despite technological advancements and the development of sophisticated digital intelligence tools, the human factor remains indispensable.

Communication skills go beyond merely transmitting a message; they also include the ability to build trusting relationships, operate effectively in diverse cultural environments, interpret behaviors accurately, and adapt discourse to changing situations. The evolutionary study conducted in Afghanistan has demonstrated that officers who combine empathetic communication, social understanding, and strategic use of modern technologies can turn human interactions into valuable sources of intelligence.

The article also highlights that developing communication skills in HUMINT is an ongoing, adaptable process, shaped by the specifics of each mission and ongoing changes in the security environment. In particular, managing relations with the local population, intercultural interaction, and using persuasive communication in digital spaces demonstrate that the modern HUMINT officer must be a well-rounded specialist—both an expert in human relations and knowledgeable about the virtual information environment.

Looking ahead, a dual challenge is emerging: the need to stay in direct contact with human sources while expanding communication methods through digital media and online platforms.



In this context, continuously improving communication skills becomes not only a professional requirement but also a strategic condition for maintaining

the relevance and effectiveness of HUMINT in an increasingly volatile and fragmented operational environment.

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