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# The Literature of Competitive Intelligence

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## ABSTRACT

THE LITERATURE CONCERNED WITH competitive intelligence (CI) and related issues lies primarily outside that of library and information science. Because the relevant subjects are not always clearly defined, and because related terms are used interchangeably, bibliographic access can be difficult. The CI literature is described in terms of its location, quantity, authorship, length, and problems of bibliographic access.

## INTRODUCTION

Competitive intelligence (CI) activities are information-gathering activities, yet the major portion of the CI literature resides outside the mainstream library and information science literature. Because the field is interdisciplinary, relevant works can also be found in the business and scientific literatures and, perhaps because aspects of CI activities capture the imaginations of nonspecialist readers, one can easily find coverage in newspapers and popular magazines. As implied by some of the preceding articles, the field has remained relatively informal. Practitioners have a variety of educational backgrounds and experience. It is only relatively recently that interested professionals have assembled to share their experiences and promote their activities. The Society of Competitive Intelligence Professionals (SCIP—formerly the Society of Competitor Intelligence Professionals) was founded in 1986 and currently has about 1,600 members. Of interest to CI researchers and practitioners is its quarterly journal, *The*

*Competitive Intelligence Review*, with a circulation of about 2,000, and a membership newsletter, *The Competitive Intelligencer*.

### BIBLIOGRAPHIC ACCESS

Appropriate indexes include *ABI/Inform*, *Business Periodicals Index*, and other standard business, business news, and news indexes, as well as *ERIC*, *Library Literature*, and *Library and Information Science Abstracts*. A regular feature of the *Competitive Intelligence Review*, the "Competitive Intelligence Library," by Bonnie Hohhof, serves the readership as a current awareness tool. It provides bibliographic citations, brief abstracts, and book reviews. Sable (1985) compiled a large bibliography of works (articles, books, and dissertations) about industrial espionage and trade secrets. Valuable literature discussions are supplied by relevant dissertations and other large-scale research projects. Several of the books discussed later provide bibliographic access in the form of lists of recommended readings. While several of them are designated "bibliographies," perhaps the best is a "select bibliography" by Roukis, Conway, and Charnov (1990) with over 300 books—some on intelligence practices in general—and 178 articles (pp. 295-315). A useful review of the environmental scanning literature has been provided by Choo and Auster (1993).

### SUBJECT ACCESS TO COMPETITIVE INTELLIGENCE AND RELATED TOPICS

The *Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH)* (1993) supplies a scope note for "business intelligence" (vol. 1, p. 666) which, with "issues management" (vol. 2, p. 2445) are the two relevant terms that are official headings. Linked to this term, and illustrating some of the problems with terminology, are seven "used for" terms:

- business espionage;
- corporate intelligence;
- espionage, business;
- espionage, industrial;
- industrial espionage;
- intelligence, business; and
- intelligence, corporate.

The terms, especially those referring to espionage, are not synonymous with "business intelligence." Similar problems are expressed among the broader topics:

- business ethics;
- competition, unfair; and
- industrial management.

Note that several legitimate activities are expressed by these terms, although they are not distinguished from one another. Others imply unethical or illegal information-gathering activities that have little to do with accepted practices of intelligence gathering. "Competitive intelligence" itself is not an established term in *LCSH*. For works about environmental scanning, *LCSH* refers to the term "organizational environment." For information seekers in this area, it is important to recognize the limitations of these subject headings.

A brief study of the competitive intelligence literature as reflected in *ABI/Inform*, a major business database, was carried out to answer the following questions:

- Which of the terms under consideration for this issue of *Library Trends* appear as terms in the subject fields of the database's records?
- Which of the terms appear in title or abstract fields?
- Do sets of articles retrieved by the individual terms coincide with each other, or do terms retrieve sets with little overlap which might indicate they have more distinct definitions?

The search covered the CD-ROM version of the database from January 1987 through June 1994 and considered the following terms: "business intelligence," "competitive intelligence," "competitor intelligence," "environmental scanning," and "issues management." Combinations including the term "strategic," such as "strategic intelligence," yielded articles in this and other databases, but many articles were concerned with military, rather than business, aspects of intelligence-gathering activities. Two terms appeared in the subject fields of the *ABI/Inform* records—"competitive intelligence" and "environmental scanning." The others appeared in abstract or title fields. Table 1 lists the terms and the number of articles retrieved for each for the period.

The two closest terms in meaning, "competitive intelligence" and "competitor intelligence," retrieve widely different numbers of articles, likely due to the latter's fall from usage in favor of the former. Not only did SCIP change its name, but writers in the field also shifted from one term to the other over a period of years. The number of articles retrieved by "competitor intelligence" rose from two in 1987 to eleven in 1989 and has declined to four and six articles for 1992 and 1993, respectively. For the preferred term, the number of articles has gradually increased from 1987 with eight articles, to 1993 for which fifty-three were retrieved. One retrieves very few articles using "competitor intelligence" that are not retrieved with "competitive intelligence."

There is not considerable overlap between or among the terms. Only two articles were retrieved that shared three of the five terms mentioned earlier: "business intelligence," "competitive intelligence,"

and "competitor intelligence." For articles sharing two terms, the numbers are also small as shown in Table 2.

"Issues management" shares seven articles with "environmental scanning" but no others. The highest rates of coincidence occur among the terms "business intelligence," "competitive intelligence," and "competitor intelligence." Additional comparisons of terms consisting of single words rather than the two-word expressions used here could lead to additional conclusions. For instance, it is likely that, while the use of one-word terms in combination with each other would lead to a high degree of recall, the use of two-word terms would result in higher precision. A thorough analysis of even the most important permutations would be beyond the scope of this survey.

### COMPETITIVE INTELLIGENCE RESEARCH

While most of the competitive intelligence literature has been intended for the consumption of busy managers or CI professionals, there have been serious studies of these topics. Empirical research, including some dissertations, has been cited by Choo and Auster (1993)

TABLE 1.  
ARTICLES RETRIEVED FROM *ABI/INFORM* FOR THE PERIOD JANUARY 1987  
THROUGH JUNE 1994 USING SELECTED TERMS

<i>Terms</i>	<i>Articles Retrieved with Terms in Subject Field</i>	<i>Articles Retrieved</i>
Business intelligence	0	49
Competitive intelligence	212	255
Competitor intelligence	0	35
Environmental scanning	167	192
Issues management	0	115
Total articles retrieved:		646
Total, minus duplicates:		590

TABLE 2.  
ARTICLES RETRIEVED BY TERM PAIRS (BASED ON SEARCH IN TABLE 1)

	<i>Issues Management</i>	<i>Environmental Scanning</i>	<i>Competitor Intelligence</i>	<i>Competitive Intelligence</i>
Business intelligence	0	2	3	20
Competitive intelligence	0	3	23	-
Competitor intelligence	0	0	-	-
Environmental scanning	7	-	-	-

and Miller (in his case study earlier in this issue of *Library Trends*). An example of a large-scale survey can be seen in the study of 1,483 executives by the Conference Board, Inc. (Sutton 1988). An eight-page questionnaire was designed to elicit the following kinds of information:

- importance of monitoring competitors' activities;
- importance to top management of monitoring competitors' activities;
- relative development of company monitoring system;
- effectiveness of company monitoring systems;
- trends of companies' monitoring activities;
- functional title of person responsible for monitoring competitors' activities;
- rank of person responsible for monitoring competitors' activities;
- functional title of executive to whom monitoring person reports;
- rank of executive to whom monitoring person reports;
- key to maintaining an effective monitoring system;
- types of information about competitors;
- information sources (within the company, within the trade, published information, and other);
- media in which information is made available; and
- examples of decisions relying on monitoring information

A significant portion of the report is a set of summaries of CI systems written by executives in the following corporations: AT&T; Kraft, Inc.; Motorola, Inc.; Adolph Coors Company; Pfizer, Inc.; Combustion Engineering, Inc.; and several others who expressed wishes of anonymity. The resulting report is a snapshot of CI practices for the period of the study.

### THE MONOGRAPHIC LITERATURE

Are books the best place to find information about competitive intelligence? As is the case with many practical fields that value currency over almost everything else, information about CI and related activities is communicated through personal channels first, secondarily through articles in the periodic professional literature, and lastly through books. Books take longer to write and produce but tend to retain their value longer. For CI, they are perhaps most valuable for summarizing, synthesizing, and evaluating recent professional practices. This kind of literature attempts to be more comprehensive and is more likely than the journal literature to address ethical, legal, and philosophical issues. One of the better chapters on CI ethics is by Gilad and Gilad (1988, pp. 205-213). Bonnie Hohhof, formerly a CI practitioner at two major corporations and now a CI consultant—

and also the primary literature reviewer for the *Competitive Intelligence Review*—recommends several book-length surveys of the field: Fuld (1988), Gordon (1989), Meyer (1987), Powell (1992), Prescott (1989), Tyson (1986, 1990), among others, to which may be added her own recent work (Hohhof, 1994). In addition to these, there are many handbooks for establishing CI systems, including Sammon, Kurland, and Spitalnic (1984), and Tyson (1986).

One of the very best surveys of the field is a collection of contributions by a variety of researchers edited by Roukis, Conway, and Charnov (1990). The book is not a competitive intelligence handbook. Thoroughly documenting their chapters, the authors address theoretical and practical issues facing CI at national and international levels. It is worth noting that none of the twenty authors represents library or information science; besides management and economics, their specialties include geography, mathematics, engineering, and political science.

Stanat (1990) expresses her conception of corporate-shared information networks in the form of an eleven-step method of designing and developing such systems. The idea behind such programs is one that prevents information hoarding at departmental or individual levels and encourages the sharing of information through a centralized system—either a database or information center.

Recommended frequently in the competitive intelligence literature is a work by Gilad and Gilad (1988). Despite its age, the work is clearly organized and appropriate for managers or CI practitioners of today because it is concerned with broad conceptual issues rather than specific technical problems. It is one of the few works to address ethical issues of CI.

In his work for upper-level managers, Mathey (1991) provides a well-balanced picture of the competitive intelligence process. He clearly explains how systematic and highly specific methods of information collection can be implemented. Perhaps most useful, especially for those information professionals who are accustomed to the gathering and organizing of information but not to its analysis, is Mathey's attention to competitive analysis activities. He argues strongly that CI, with a strong analytical component, is an excellent return on investment.

Likewise providing a useful chapter on analysis, Vella and McGonagle (1988) survey such topics as (intentional) disinformation, the integration of competitive intelligence into business planning and defensive CI. Several appendixes in the book are of potential use for CI professionals or departments: "The CI Process—An Outline," "A CI Classification System" (a system of classifying the reliability of

data, not of information sources), "Competitor Analysis Outline," and "Setting Up an Internal CI Unit."

Experienced business librarians will not be enlightened by *The Competitive Intelligence Handbook* by Combs and Moorhead (1992). Several chapters introduce standard business reference sources but do not approach the breadth and depth of any of the standard guides to business information. The authors also provide information on specialized databases and a short discussion of books about CI. Perhaps the most useful chapter presents some "axioms of competitive intelligence" including the following:

- most of the information needed for a given project is available through publicly available channels;
- information is where you find it;
- single sources of information are unreliable;
- someone else cares about the subject; and
- companies, like individuals, leave a paper trail as they go about their business.

Some of these guidelines are common research strategies, others are merely inspirational; yet for novice information seekers these truisms are succinct and their explanations potentially instructive.

### ESPIONAGE AND SECURITY

The competitive intelligence literature frequently emphasizes that intelligence activities are *legal* means of acquiring information about companies, their products, their personnel, and the business environment. There is a large related literature about industrial espionage (and counter-espionage), trade secrets, and security that can be fruitfully consulted by CI professionals. While such areas are beyond the scope of this issue, two examples are useful here. One is a book-length bibliography of works about industrial espionage and trade secrets from 1907 through 1984 (Sable, 1985). Besides providing a comprehensive list of works on the topic, it examines the growth of the field as reflected in the literature decade by decade. The second, a book about industrial espionage, can serve—despite its age—as an introduction to intelligence-gathering methods (Bottom & Gallati, 1984). It is intended to be a guide for security managers who want to guard against spies and saboteurs. It is not a spy manual but rather an introduction to covert information-gathering tactics and the means of preventing them. Not included, of course, are issues affected by advances in electronic storage and retrieval, communications technologies, and networks. Major topics include:

- roots of industrial espionage;

- competitive intelligence;
- likely participants in industrial espionage;
- information gathering and retention;
- ethical and legal issues;
- planning and organizing counterintelligence operations;
- investigative methods (communications, undercover assignment, placing agents, identifying enemy agents, information development, doubling espionage agents, reconnaissance and surveillance, and others);
- scientific and technical aids;
- research activity (briefing/debriefing, overt/covert sources);
- refining counterintelligence data;
- producing intelligence;
- uses of intelligence; and
- security.

### JOURNALS AND COMPETITIVE INTELLIGENCE

As indicated in the introduction to this issue of *Library Trends*, dozens of journals and magazines regularly carry articles about competitive intelligence and related topics. A small amount of coverage can be found through standard indexes to the library literature in such periodicals as *Online*, *Special Libraries*, and a few others. Four articles form the core of a special issue of *Minnesota Libraries* (vol. 28, Winter 1987-1988). InfoTrac's *Academic Index*, which covers about 1,500 academic journals, and the *New York Times*, retrieves fewer than 100 items using the five terms as subjects or keywords for the period 1990 through June 1994. The ERIC database, for the period 1982 through June 1994, retrieves only twelve articles with the terms "business intelligence," "competitive intelligence," or "competitor intelligence," but supplies leads to 395 items for "environmental scanning" and "issues management," most concerned with educational institutions.

Most of the journal literature is to be found among business periodicals. The search of *ABI/Inform*, mentioned earlier, yielded 646 articles (590 with duplicates removed) in 171 different periodicals in the areas of management, management information systems, computers, and information science (the latter including the *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* and *Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science*). Table 3 lists the periodicals containing five or more articles retrieved using all of the five related terms mentioned earlier.

A bibliometric analysis would probably demonstrate that Bradford's law holds in an exaggerated way: given the subject of competitive intelligence over a period of about seven years, a very small

TABLE 3.  
 PERIODICALS WITH FIVE OR MORE CI AND RELATED ARTICLES, RETRIEVED  
 FROM ABI/INFORM FOR THE PERIOD JANUARY 1987 THROUGH JUNE 1994.

<i>Periodical</i>	<i>Number of Articles</i>
1. <i>Long Range Planning</i>	24
2. <i>Security Management</i>	20
3. <i>Public Relations Journal</i>	19
4. <i>Journal of Business Strategy</i>	15
5. <i>Computerworld</i>	14
6. <i>Planning Review</i>	12
7. <i>Journal of Management</i>	11
8. <i>Bank Marketing</i>	9
9. <i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>	9
10. <i>Business Marketing</i>	8
11. <i>Database</i>	8
12. <i>Management Accounting</i>	8
13. <i>Public Relations Review</i>	8
14. <i>Strategic Management Journal</i>	8
15. <i>Across the Board</i>	7
16. <i>Association Management</i>	7
17. <i>Sales and Marketing Management</i>	7
18. <i>Business Quarterly</i>	6
19. <i>Business Horizons</i>	6
20. <i>CA Magazine</i>	6
21. <i>Chief Executive</i>	6
22. <i>Forbes</i>	6
23. <i>Information Strategy: The Executive's Journal</i>	6
24. <i>Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing</i>	6
25. <i>Marketing News</i>	6
26. <i>National Underwriter</i>	6
27. <i>Online</i>	6
28. <i>Communication World</i>	5
29. <i>Environment Today</i>	5
30. <i>Marketing Intelligence and Planning</i>	5
31. <i>Small Business Reports</i>	5

number of journals publish a disproportionately high percentage of the articles in the field and most publish only one (Diodato, 1994, p. 24). Table 4 lists the most frequently appearing journals for the period of January 1990 through March 1994 for each of the five terms.

Each of the articles retrieved by the term "competitor intelligence" appears in a different journal, representing a most extreme Bradford "distribution." For none of the terms can one speak of three equal Bradford zones. For some reason—perhaps because the sample is too small or because the literature is very practice oriented—the classic Bradford distribution does not apply. This literature could be described as having a very small core and very much scatter. The scatter includes dozens of periodicals as diverse as *Agri Marketing*, *American Salesman*,

TABLE 4.  
NUMBER OF PERIODICALS WITH ARTICLES RETRIEVED FROM *ABI/INFORM* FOR  
EACH OF THE FIVE TERMS (FOR JANUARY 1990 THROUGH MARCH 1994)

<i>Number of Articles per Periodical for the Period</i>	<i>Number of Periodicals with Articles about Business Intelligence</i>	<i>Number of Periodicals with Articles about Competitive Intelligence</i>	<i>Number of Periodicals with Articles about Competitor Intelligence</i>	<i>Number of Periodicals with Articles about Environmental Scanning</i>	<i>Number of Periodicals with Articles about Issues Management</i>
1	21	61	19	53	27
2	2	15	0	6	5
3	0	11	0	0	4
4	1	3	0	1	0
5	0	1	0	1	1
6	1	0	0	0	0
7	0	1	0	1	1
8	0	0	0	0	0
9	0	1	0	0	0
10	0	0	0	0	0
11	0	0	0	0	1
12	0	0	0	0	0
13	0	0	0	0	0
14	0	1	0	0	0
Total periodicals/ Total articles:	25/34	94/177	19/19	62/80	39/71

*Lodging Hospitality*, and *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management*. Samples from the cores for the four terms that retrieved multiple articles in small numbers of journals provide a summary of the most prolific journals in each area. The following journals contain four or more articles for the period January 1990 through March 1994:

Business intelligence: *Computerworld* (6 articles), and *Business Strategy* (4).

Competitive intelligence: *Security Management* (14), *Journal of Business Strategy* (9), *Computerworld* (7), *Long Range Planning* (5), *Database* (4), *Research-Technology Management* (4), and *Small Business Reports* (4).

Environmental scanning: *Long Range Planning* (7), *Environment Today* (5), and *CA Magazine* (4).

Issues management: *Public Relations Journal* (11), *Public Relations Review* (7), and *Management Accounting* (5).

Two periodicals are concerned primarily with CI but are not indexed by the *Business Periodicals Index* or *ABI/Inform*: the two SCIP publications mentioned earlier, the *Competitive Intelligence Review* (1990-) and the society's newsletter, *Competitive Intelligencer* (1986-).

### JOURNAL AUTHORS AND COMPETITIVE INTELLIGENCE

Most competitive intelligence practitioners are very active professionals with little desire or incentive to write about what they do, but it is precisely from this group that most of the journal literature originates. Among the most prolific writers are CI practitioners and consultants with ties to SCIP. The authors most likely to carry out research about CI activities, philosophies, or education, or to write long articles, are academics.

By far, most of the authors in this field write one article or a portion of an article each. A search of *ABI/Inform* for a seven and one-half year period indicates (see Table 5) that more than 90 percent of authors wrote fewer than two articles each, about 5 percent wrote two or 2.33 articles each, and very few wrote three or more articles (using an adjusted count for co-authors). That this is an exaggerated version of Lotka's law (Diodato, 1994, p. 105) may be due to the practice-oriented nature of the literature.

TABLE 5.  
AUTHORS WITH TWO OR MORE CI ARTICLES EACH AS RETRIEVED FROM *ABI/INFORM*  
FOR THE PERIOD JANUARY 1987 THROUGH JUNE 1994 (CO-AUTHORS ARE REPRESENTED  
PROPORTIONATELY)

<i>Author</i>	<i>Number of Articles</i>	<i>Percent of Total Articles Retrieved (646)</i>
Anonymous	41	6.35
Fuld, Leonard	8	1.23
Herring, Jan P.	6	0.92
Ojala, Marydee	5	0.77
Arbetter, Lisa	4	0.61
Betts, Mitch	3	0.46
Dresner, Howard	3	0.46
McGonagle, John J.	3	0.46
Tanzer, Marc	3	0.46
Gilad, Benjamin	2.33	0.36
14 authors	2	4.33
11 authors	1.5, 1.33, or 1.25	2.63
574 authors	1 or fewer	88.85

Most articles in this field are not jointly authored, as demonstrated by Table 6. It is not surprising that most articles are written by single authors, but it is striking that there exists such a considerable variation from one of the five search terms to the others.

Why is a significantly larger percentage of articles retrieved by "environmental scanning" written by two or more authors? Some of the variation may be attributable to the small sample, but there may be other explanations. Among the journals with articles about environmental scanning, there seems to be a higher percentage of

TABLE 6.  
NUMBER OF CI ARTICLES, BY NUMBER OF AUTHORS PER ARTICLE RETRIEVED  
FROM *ABI/INFORM* FOR THE PERIOD JANUARY 1990 THROUGH MARCH 1994

<i>Term</i>	<i>1 Author/ Percent of Total Articles</i>	<i>2 Authors/ Percent of Total Articles</i>	<i>3 Authors/ Percent of Total Articles</i>	<i>4 Authors/ Percent of Total Articles</i>	<i>Total Articles</i>
Business Intelligence	32/94	2/6	0/0	0/0	34
Competitive Intelligence	145/81	21/12	6/3	5/3	177
Competitor Intelligence	16/84	2/11	0/0	1/5	19
Environmental Scanning	57/71	16/20	5/6	2/3	80
Issues Management	60/84	8/11	1/1	2/3	71

TABLE 7.  
MEDIAN NUMBER OF PAGES FOR ARTICLES RETRIEVED FROM *ABI/INFORM*  
FOR THE PERIOD JANUARY 1987 THROUGH JUNE 1994

<i>Terms</i>	<i>Median Number of Pages per Article</i>
Business Intelligence	3
Competitive Intelligence	4
Competitor Intelligence	4
Environmental Scanning	7
Issues Management	4

academic journals, which may be more likely than practical business periodicals to contain multi-authored articles. There is a significant difference in length between articles about environmental scanning and the others. Based on a search of *ABI/Inform* for January 1990 through March 1994, it can be shown that the median number of pages per article for those retrieved by the term "environmental scanning" is much higher than for the other terms (see Table 7).

Articles about environmental scanning indeed tend to be longer than the others; 39 percent are ten or more pages in length compared with 9 percent for "business intelligence," 13 percent for "competitive/competitor intelligence," and 21 percent for "issues management." For competitive/competitor intelligence, a higher percentage of articles are one page or less (17 percent) than are ten or more pages in length (13 percent). About 42 percent of the articles retrieved with "competitive intelligence" or "competitor intelligence" are three or fewer pages.

## CONCLUSION

Most of the competitive intelligence literature is created by individual CI practitioners for others in the field. For that reason,

most publishing in the area consists of very short professional articles in business periodicals rather than research. To unusually high degrees, authors are very likely to write only one article each about the subject, and journals are very likely to publish only one article each. Very few authors have written more than two articles and few journals have published more than ten CI articles. Because some terms have been used interchangeably and because the subject is interdisciplinary, there exist certain problems of bibliographic access that can be surmounted by a working knowledge of controlled vocabularies and by an awareness of the existence of multiple related expressions in postcoordinate retrieval systems.

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