

## (U) The SIGINT Philosopher: Too Many Choices

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(U//FOUO) Editor's note: SIDtoday [sought out](#) a "SIGINT philosopher" in our midst, and we found him! We are pleased to announce that [REDACTED] (pictured), a Russian language analyst, will be penning a monthly column on that theme, starting today. The below column is unclassified in its entirety:

I'm not a pleasant person to shop with.

The reason is simple -- an overabundance of choices. The second I'm placed in front of a plethora of tastes, textures, prices, and sizes, I lose my bearings. I don't know the difference between preserves, jams, jellies, or spreads. I know what I like on toast, but heaven help me if I have to go find it in the aisle. Do I go with the bigger jar? What about sugar-free? Swirled with peanut butter? Am I safe with a store brand, or can I assume that with a name like "Smucker's," it has to be good?

You may be wondering right about now just what any of this has to do with SIGINT...

Plenty. We in the agency are at risk of a similar, collective paralysis in the face of a dizzying array of choices every single day.

"Analysis paralysis" isn't only a cute rhyme. It's the term for what happens when you spend so much time analyzing a situation that you ultimately stymie any outcome. It's what happens inside your grandfather's brain while you wait endlessly for him to make his move on the chess board. It's what happens when I stand in front of the jams and jellies at the supermarket. And it's what happens in SIGINT when we have access to endless possibilities, but we struggle to prioritize, narrow, and exploit the best ones.

But hey, we're only human, right? That's my point exactly. Ever wonder why the Pepsi Challenge only had two colas to pick from, or why taste-tests don't ask you to sample dozens of flavors? It's because we're cognitively wired to consume only so much information when making crucial decisions. It's why the best tasting sample will win by leaps and bounds against two competitors, but only by a small margin over many.

In 1971, Herbert Simon could not have known how prophetic the following statement was, given that he was still two decades away from the dawn of the information age:

***"...in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it."***

*(Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World, 1971)*

In an evolving climate where there are few constants, heuristics (rules of thumb) are of little help in drilling down to our most useful accesses and fulfilling our mission. We spend every day trying to

solve what sociologists call "wicked problems." They're tagged as such due to the changing nature of requirements, capabilities, and priorities. They have no ultimate solution and no way to concretely verify the quality of the outcome. These are problems with many "best" answers, and a far greater number of "good" answers. When tackling such issues, narrowing the playing field can be equally vital to broadening our expertise.

The SIGINT mission is far too pressing for many team-building activities or brain-storming sessions aiming to improve our organizational approach to analysis. At the same time, the SIGINT mission is far too vital to unnecessarily expand the haystacks while we search for the needles. Prioritization is key.

And now, if you'll excuse me, I'm off to the store for some jam...