



(U) Write Right: A Note on Validity Wording (repost)

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of the Reporting Board (S12A)
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(U//FOUO) A longtime reporter asked a more detailed question relating to the [column on "possible" and "probable"](#): "In years past, SIGINT reporters would use [these words] to convey confidence levels on the order of 20% or 80%, respectively. Beyond correct grammar usage, does contemporary reporting still use those expressions to suggest confidence factors?"

(U//FOUO) Our correspondent is right about past attempts to quantify those terms. A Reporting Board member recalled that a scale was specified in an old version of USSID 300, and produced a 1985 version of the SIGINT Reporters' Style Manual with a table showing A through D Validity, a numerical equivalent of certainty, and a list of words suggested for each level (B-val: "probably," "apparent"; D-val: "suggests," "tenuous," etc.). ~~Apparently~~ (oops, our information was A val, so no validity wording required) this codification resulted from a desire to conform with the same scale used by linguists in transcriptions and translations -- a case of comparing apples and oranges. Determining what someone said and what they meant, or how other factors affected the situation, are very different skills.

(U) Official attempts to insure uniformity are often motivated by a desire to make intelligence assessments completely objective and certain. The usual result, however, is something like the scene in the movie "Dead Poets Society" where the teacher reads from a textbook that outlines the two-axis scale of qualifications necessary for a poem to be considered "great." Such systems distract from the ability to judge a report.

(U) The Reporting Board recommends that reporters use validity terms in a way that they themselves are comfortable with and can defend if questions arise about their reports; it's particularly important to be consistent within a report (e.g., don't toss in a "possibly" for the sake of variety when you've been referring to something as "likely"). Yes, there have been recent rumors of high-level discussions that raise the question of how to quantify everything possible in an intelligence report, but we believe that "not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts."

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