# All That's Digital

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**By Amir Fleischman**

*In this article: Nowadays in our industry, where all the trendy buzzwords come mainly from the digital front – data science, visualization, cyber security, artificial intelligence and the like – it seems we have forgotten to put our money on the most valuable, solid, winning horse in the race, which is human intelligence.*

I teach web intelligence (WEBINT). I do it all the time, all over the world, and enjoy it a lot. It is one of those exciting sub fields of competitive intelligence (CI) that never rests. Unlike the unchanged traditional models and tools we all know and use for our CI-related purposes, vibrant technological developments keep on popping up with multiple shiny solutions to help us do our job properly and efficiently, without spending too much effort on the eternal pursuit of qualitative intelligence. Search engines and operators, social media networks, professional forums and databases, alerting tools and sophisticated mobile applications – they are all there, and they are here to stay. We can certainly do a better job than ever, since everything – every single piece of data – is digital these days. This is true in our personal and professional life alike, as it is for others; but is that enough?

As a tech savvy teacher, who more than once has claimed that the future CI practitioner will have to learn at some point how to program, I must admit that finding qualitative information about competition is more than just a few clicks away, not to mention analyzing it and coming up with the right decisions and hence actions. As a person who makes a nice living out of the Internet, I will take a risk and state the obvious – **in many cases all those fabulous digital tools are deficient for creating a first rate research work that should lead to an unusual insight about a specific market, player or product**. They are too shallow, too predictable and rarely deliver the game changing factor we looking for.

Take this for example: I regularly work with entrepreneurs, advising them on marketing and intelligence-related issues when they set up their new businesses. I remember in particular an entrepreneur who wanted to set up a coffee shop in a prestigious neighborhood in Tel Aviv and attended one of my WEBINT workshops. The entrepreneur was fascinated by all the tools I presented, and in our first consultation meeting immediately asked me the following question:

> *"I would like to set up my coffee shop in a specific hangout place, a nice square, where another coffee shop, a very popular and successful one, has been already active for years. I would like to know everything about them – their offerings and prices, local staff and suppliers, their working hours, the type of clientele; I even want to know the ingredients of their special Chef salad's dressing. I want it all. I got myself a new laptop that is WiFi connected; now please tell me where to dig for relevant information – which specific vertical search engines should I use, what kind of search operator should be taken into account and what are the right keywords or phrases I should type into Google's search query? Show me your magic, this is so exciting!"*

I looked at the excited fellow and replied in short:

> *"You don't need a laptop."*

> *"I don't?"*

> *"You don't,"* I repeated. *"All you need is a bench."*

> *"A bench?"* the excitement was replaced with a glazed look.

> *"Listen,"* I said, *"it is great to practice business intelligence as long as it is useful. Nevertheless, the sort of information you are looking for about that competitor of yours will not be found on the Net; at least not all of it. Getting intelligence is all about observations. You need to observe that coffee shop, and for that purpose a bench will do a better job than Google. Find yourself a bench and start observing – observe throughout a day, a week, a weekend and so forth. Run surveys and get the number of visitors in specific times. Simultaneously, try to define those visitors: are most of them men, women, elderly people, businessmen, teenagers? Have you ever thought of approaching those visitors with short prepared questionnaires? You will get authentic first-hand answers about the place, its food and atmosphere, what they like about it (and what they do not like), what will make them come back if at all etc."*

The entrepreneur was absorbing the rather new approach. *"Then what?"* he asked.

> *"Then go into the coffee shop and ask for a menu. Go over the meals, study their prices, check the salt and pepper bags and get to know who produces them; same thing with the tablecloth and box of lettuce a delivery guy has just placed in a corner. Leave your table for a moment, chase the delivery guy and start asking him questions – "How long have you been supplying lettuce to that coffee shop, what else do you provide them, what are the terms of payment, can I work with you too?" etc. Go back to your table, ask the waiter what is inside the special Chef salad's dressing, since you are allergic to peanuts, or anything else, and get their ingredients as well. That is how you will get valuable information that Google, Facebook and the like will never be able to give you."*

The entrepreneur rolled his eyes and said nothing. This is the current problem with young entrepreneurs and managers, as with young people in general. **They rush to their laptops or mobile phones in hopes of finding the desired information there, instead of asking themselves where would be the best place to look for it, and the right, efficient ways to get it**. Most of the information, I assure you, will be easily found in a colleague's room next to theirs, at a store nearby or a phone call away, rather than in their iPhone. If only they took their eyes away from the screen!

## HUMAN INTELLIGENCE'S CLEAREST ADVANTAGE

Any CI manager will tell you that practicing Human Intelligence (HUMINT) is more expensive, complex and time consuming than practicing WEBINT, which obviously makes sense. It is always quicker and simpler to browse a competitor's website than pay a visit to its physical store, factory or trade show booth. Add to that the general misconception that if the information cannot be digitally obtained, then apparently it is either non-existent or simply not important, and the fact that most of our stakeholders want the intelligence ASAP, preferably without the need to invest a great deal of resources (particularly in small, mid-sized businesses) within long grueling processes, and you will have grasped the unfortunate reality in which young CI practitioners live and operate today. **The starting point of research for most of them is whatever they can find on the Net.** It always strikes me how in most cases we tend to start looking for information in external environments (yes, the Internet is an external environment to your business), rather than the internal ones. Believe it or not, there's a fair chance that the information you're looking for is already within your organization's walls; you only need to shut down your laptop and start wandering around.

Management by wandering around (MBWA) refers to a style of business management which involves managers wandering around, in an unstructured manner, through the workplace, at random, to check with employees, equipment, or on the status of ongoing work. The origin of the term has been traced to executives at Hewlett-Packard (HP) for management practices in the 1970s. I remember hearing stories about HP placing toilets in remote floors, so by the time employees finally reached them they were "forced" to go through their co-workers' cubicles and actually talk to them. This is how close relations were formed and high level of information sharing was achieved.



I argue that CI managers in particular should do the same; both internally and externally. They should leave their comfort zone – be it a physical one, like their office, or a digital one, like Google – and start wandering around. **That is how you get to see all the real, authentic material that is digitally inaccessible.** When you wander around you see different things, you talk to different people and get different perspectives. Not just the one and only text dictated to you by whatever target's website (a target is any relevant market player: competitor, supplier, customer etc.). Start internally – move away from your desk and visit other departments, enter the shared kitchen, go up and down some floors and talk to the warehouse employees (for further reading about internal corporate human intelligence see my article "**Look Inside Too**" published in Competitive Intelligence – Fall 2018"). Then move externally – see and talk to your targets in their own working places, their own surrounding. The information you will get in the real world is much deeper and accurate than that on Twitter.

My dear colleague **Dr. Michael Neugarten** once noted that we currently live in an 'era of downloads.' We download almost everything that is digital – books, songs, movies, software etc. "Stop downloading the world," he almost pleaded, "Instead, go out to the world. There is a real world out there, and it is far more comprehensive, enriching and truthful than whatever you download to your computers or mobile devices." Online information, in many cases, is biased, intentionally minimal – yet with numerous unnecessary background noises – and misleading. It has been uploaded only because it serves someone's interests, nothing more. When looking for information about a company or product in a reseller's website or an online store, rest assured you will find all the great things about them: the prizes they won in the industry, the flattering stories, testimonials of satisfied clients and so forth. Chances are that you will not be able to find negative or other genuine information that actually matters and may serve as a game changer for you. Remember that people and companies tend to wear their show-off costumes when they are online. The Internet is full of disguised entities; it is probably its biggest disadvantage, and at the same time HUMINT's biggest and clearest advantage. **The real world in most cases does not lie, the digital world does**. So why do we insist on heavily relying on it?

## PROPORTIONS

A couple of years ago, I was working for a company who competed against a Chinese giant (or so it seemed) in the software sector. I thoroughly looked for information about my business rival in many digital information sources, and the picture that appeared was of a frightening competitor – they had a brilliant website, plenty of neat advertisements on Google, Facebook and YouTube, and wherever I searched for industry-related news I could not avoid that company. It seemed they were everywhere; sector domination at its best.Then I went to a trade fair in Italy. I knew that the Chinese were going to exhibit there, and I was pretty sure that they would have an impressive central booth with many representatives and an impressive display. To my surprise, when I arrived at the venue I realized that they had a tiny booth, at the corner of the smallest pavilion. I approached the booth and saw an Asian teenager, wearing a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. Sitting and playing with his mobile phone, he looked bored and was waiting for someone to talk to. I asked him where the company's CEO was since I had several questions for him. He then grinned; got up from his seat and replied with broken English that it was actually him. He was the man I was frightened of. I could barely understand his English, and was wondering how he expected to interact with people, not to mention western customers, without being able to clearly present his company and products. He kept on pointing his finger at a flyer with a link to his fabulous website, hinting that all of my questions could be answered there. The gap between the outstanding online appearance and the miserable physical one was astonishing. Thereafter, I heard that this CEO has invested all of his money in online marketing (rather than in qualitative products), and several months later his company shut down all of its business operations and went bankrupt. **All that glitters is not gold, especially in the digital arena where everyone can cheaply shine and pretend to be more than what they really are**.

## THE YEARS OF FAKE NEWS

Fake news consists of deliberate disinformation spread today mostly via digital means, such as Internet websites and social media networks. The disinformation purports to be real news, often drives web traffic, and amplifies effect. As opposed to intelligence that is gathered in the real field, away from the screen, fake news makes it difficult for people to find truthful information on the Internet. It is easier for charlatans (perhaps some of your competitors?) to take advantage of the virtual space, where misleading information can be used by anyone, and deceive readers into clicking on links, maximizing traffic and profit. The inventor of the Internet himself, Tim Berners-Lee, claims that if the Internet is to be capable of truly "serving humanity," the disturbing internet trend of fake news must first be resolved. Fake news is threatening the Internet, and recent research has shown that it hurts social media and online based outlets far worse than traditional print and TV outlets. After a survey was conducted, it was found that most people had less trust in social media news stories as opposed to mainstream media after learning about fake news. **So if a large proportion of your intelligence comes from the online world, and social media in particular, you may want to think this through again**. Try to diversify your sources and look for additional credible ones, preferably non digital.

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## THE YEARS OF THE BOTS

Peter Steiner's **famous cartoon caption** ("On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."), published by The New Yorker (July 1993), symbolizes the ability of users to be active in the Internet in general anonymity, as Internet protocols do not force them to identify themselves.

These users were **human beings** that simply did not wish to expose themselves to other humans on the net, yet wanted to share their standpoints, beliefs and ideas with their surroundings. They preferred remaining hidden behind a convenient, efficient mask in their attempts to convince others of their logical arguments. The question in mind nowadays, however, is what if those users were not real humans but someone – or something – else. In recent years we face a new, somewhat disturbing, digital phenomenon, which is the appearance of bots. A bot is a software robot device – an intelligent digital agent – that does automated tasks, and is employed in social media networks to converse in natural language and generate messages. Many worldwide organizations enable their clients to communicate through bots to order a pizza, book a hotel room or contact their service center.

But what if bots are developed and used for abusive purposes? Unfortunately, that is exactly what has been happening lately on the social media front. First, bots have the potential to increase the spread of fake news, as they use algorithms to decide which articles and information specific users like, without taking into account the authenticity of an article. Secondly, people and organizations use bots to artificially bias public opinion on political events and candidates, competing companies and products or any other issues that are in dispute. Bot networks are comprised of multiple semi-automatic fake user accounts that are activated and distribute information according to their operators' intentions. Such networks include hundreds or thousands of fake accounts, sometimes even more, and the manipulation works smoothly, thanks to the large volume of fake tweets, likes etc. Some posts are written by real humans, but then they are automatically duplicated again and again, and two posts are easily turned into two hundred, which is hard to ignore, thus treated more seriously by end-users. Sounds pretty trivial, but it actually works – the quantity of messages reinforces their legitimacy.

Now think what determined, devious, affluent competitors could do with those bots when launching marketing campaigns on Instagram, selling products on Amazon, or generating reviews about your products on Yelp. Are their products THAT good? Was all the great feedback they received truly genuine? And how about those terrible reviews your competing products got? Why would so many customers complain about them all of a sudden? Are they for real? Go figure. You cannot really know. You are just another victim of the digital age which is not always faithful to whatever it pretends to be – and was promised to be. In many cases we (and our customers) simply cannot distinguish the half-truths that are an inseparable part of it.

## GET YOUR COMPETITOR PRODUCT(S)

That is exactly where we need to go back to roots. Looking at a competitor's product on Amazon is not enough – you ought to buy and "play" with it to properly determine its nature. I learned this from my colleague in the gaming industry. Whenever a new game is launched by his competitors, my friend will instantly buy that game, play it for days and thoroughly inspect every inch of it. He will never settle for an online game review placed by other purchasers. The job is always done by himself; directly by himself. That is how you get to learn other aspects encompassing the competing product as well, such as the entire purchasing process – how the product is delivered, where it is delivered, the duration that takes it to arrive at your doorstep and so forth. Do yourself a favor and do not settle for an online order. Go outside and reach the store that has the product on display.  Ask the salesman questions about it and its level of popularity among the customers who bought it. Were there any complaints? How many clients returned it to the store? Did they exchange it for something else instead? What was it? **Keep on getting your intelligence in the real field, not just the digital field**. Get more dimensions, thicker layers of information that never fail; information that has not just been observed on the screen, but one that you can touch, and if needed – even smell.

I used to work for a startup in the educational software business. Our prime product was an English learning solution that included an innovative platform to teach and learn English, so as a set of preliminary tests to determine the English level of the end-user. Our solutions were sold, among other channels, to language schools operating in the afternoon market, and our competitors attracted the same schools with their own platforms. One of our biggest challenges was to find sufficient information about the tests, as the platforms were pretty much the same. We did not know what our competitors' tests looked like and we could not find anything about them on the net. The moment everything changed was one evening when I decided to leave work early, drag my feet (actually my car) to a nearby shopping center, where one of those schools had a branch, go into that branch and tell a sales representative there that I would like to improve the level of my English. As a result, and after some quick questions by the sales representative, it was requested that I take a test to determine my English level. You can obviously guess that the test belonged to one of my direct competitors. I had to witness it with my eyes, go through a real test and learn within the process how it helped the school to accurately determine the course units I should take in order to improve my English. I could not do it online. I just had to be there, as simple as that, and it was worth more than months of frustrated online searches (and as mentioned before, I KNOW how to search the Internet).

There are no digital shortcuts. Sometimes, if not all times, you just have to leave everything and go outside. Try to experience firsthand competition in a real place rather than observe it from a distant monitor that does not provide you with the added value of the unbiased physical surroundings. **Be there, see it, talk to people and get whatever you look for as if was 1995 again**.



*Signboard at a coffee shop in London, UK*

## IN SUMMARY: BE A NUMBER 11 BUS

Last year I was invited to a SCIP conference in China, where I talked about the great online tools that come in handy when we want to find valuable information on the Internet. Then I was asked to join a panel of experts to answer some questions raised by the organizers and the audience. Each panelist was requested to name a few powerful tools to use for effective CI activities. My colleagues specified all sorts of digital tools, and when it was my turn, I paused a bit, then smiled and said:

*"The best tool of intelligence – the best there was, the best there is, and the best there will ever be – is a Number 11 bus."*

My peers looked at me silently, not sure what I was talking about. So I rose to my feet, pointed at my two legs and said: "allow me to introduce you to Number 11 bus." It IS the best intelligence tool that I have ever known. So, keep on using today's excellent digital tools for your CI-related work, but at the same time, and to a larger extent, keep on wandering around.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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