

Abstract

Uncertainty is an inherent feature of international relations – particularly, when it comes to matters of national security. Decision-makers are forced to make highly consequential decisions in an environment of incomplete information. It is the job of analysts, e.g. in the intelligence community, to provide them with relevant analyses to support decision-making. But also analysts can't eliminate uncertainty; often, estimative judgements have to be made.

This thesis compares verbal and numerical formats of uncertainty communication and their association with preferences and perceptions of both producers (analysts) and consumers (decision-makers) of analysis products. It does so by conducting an experiment ($N = 153$) which puts participants in the role of both the producer and the consumer of estimative judgements on matters of international security, eliciting their preferences and perceptions in both settings.

The results show a significant shift between producer and consumer preferences towards the numerical format. Numeric precision seems to be particularly demanded in high uncertainty assessments. The data further suggests that numeric probabilities do not create a (false) perception of expertise. However, estimate producers were inconsistent in translating verbal expressions of likelihood and analytic confidence into numeric probabilities.

Given the reluctance of intelligence communities to adopt more precise, numeric formats, this thesis suggests using numeric probabilities strategically – only where it is most needed, to add clarity to the most ambiguous verbal expressions.

Keywords: Intelligence, Intelligence Reports, Policy Memos, Uncertainty, Foresight, Intelligence Estimates, Communication, Perception, Decision-making