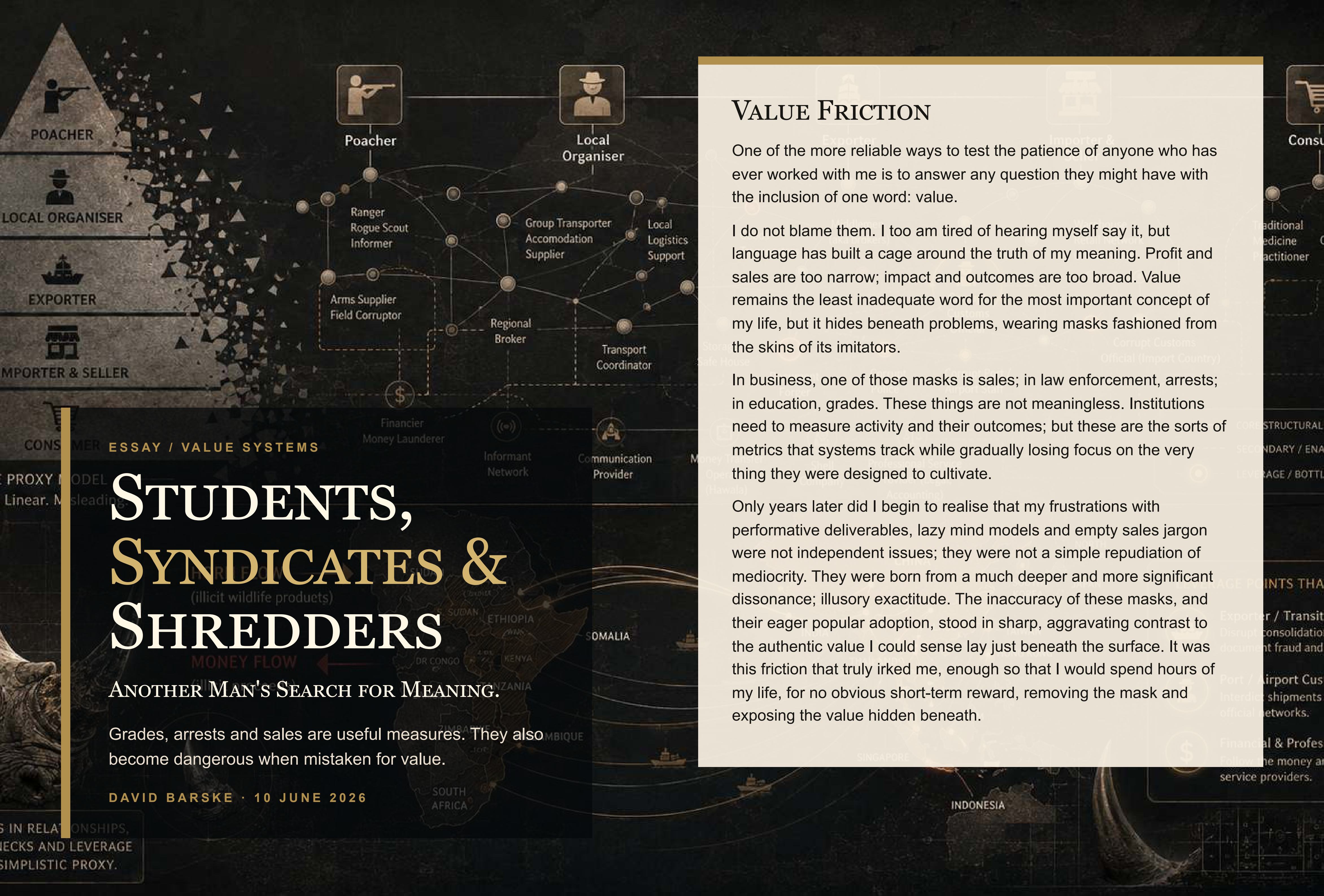

ESSAY / VALUE SYSTEMS

Students, Syndicates & Shredders

Another Man's Search for Meaning.

Grades, arrests and sales are useful measures. They also become dangerous when mistaken for value.

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Value Friction

One of the more reliable ways to test the patience of anyone who has ever worked with me is to answer any question they might have with the inclusion of one word: value.

I do not blame them. I too am tired of hearing myself say it, but language has built a cage around the truth of my meaning. Profit and sales are too narrow; impact and outcomes are too broad. Value remains the least inadequate word for the most important concept of my life, but it hides beneath problems, wearing masks fashioned from the skins of its imitators.

In business, one of those masks is sales; in law enforcement, arrests; in education, grades. These things are not meaningless. Institutions need to measure activity and their outcomes; but these are the sorts of metrics that systems track while gradually losing focus on the very thing they were designed to cultivate.

Only years later did I begin to realise that my frustrations with performative deliverables, lazy mind models and empty sales jargon were not independent issues; they were not a simple repudiation of mediocrity. They were born from a much deeper and more significant dissonance; illusory exactitude. The inaccuracy of these masks, and their eager popular adoption, stood in sharp, aggravating contrast to the authentic value I could sense lay just beneath the surface. It was this friction that truly irked me, enough so that I would spend hours of my life, for no obvious short-term reward, removing the mask and exposing the value hidden beneath.

SECTION 1

Grading Models

Over a decade ago, as a young lecturer at UCT, I taught business analysis to postgraduate students; tucked inside a vast array of frameworks and diagrams was the humble Entity Relationship Diagram, the ERD. On the surface, it is a map of a system's data; put simply, a blueprint of what the system needs to know: customers, calls, policies. It looks like mere database design, but the diagram was never really the diagram.

The ERD was just one of a dozen tools, collectively accounting for only a fraction of the syllabus. Yet, despite its modest curricular footprint, I frequently found myself spending hours sitting with students; dissecting and redesigning their models, crossing out lines and forcing them to defend the structural assumptions they had smuggled in without noticing. A small number of students came to relish this process, eagerly arriving with fresh iterations, excited to see me hack them apart. It sounds masochistic, but it was not; they had begun to realise that the diagram was exposing the quality of their thinking.

One might expect a student tasked with modelling a sales call for a massive life insurance company to be entirely underwhelmed by the assignment. Yet nothing was further from the truth. An enthused, over-caffeinated young mind would arrive early, keen to debate: What was this new policy to the client and why did they care? What did it mean to the business? When a client phoned the call centre, were they merely requesting information or were they seeking indicators of trust? If the model could not answer those questions, it had not understood the business; it had only drawn its paperwork.

So, I pushed. I asked difficult questions and sent them back to think again. Those unable to endure the intellectual friction of this ordeal had to settle for less than exciting grades. Grades, after all, are the official fiction of education; they satisfy the spreadsheet. But student grades are no guarantee of authentic business value. True value relies entirely on whether the student has learned to pierce the surface of a business problem. When a student stopped repeating process language and started interrogating it, when they became less impressed by neatness and more interested in truth, that is when the work became worth the effort.

Interestingly, those students who most relished that crucible, and actively sought out the creative destruction of their own thinking models, went on to achieve the highest velocity of career success. That did not happen because they secured a high score on an obscure assignment; it happened because they had learned how to look at a messy business situation, pierce the approved vocabulary and uncover what was actually happening underneath.

SECTION 2

Saving Rhinos or Shooting Poachers

Later, I worked in the intelligence space, partnering with NGOs and law enforcement agencies in the fight against international wildlife crime. The work focused on understanding and defeating complex, transnational organised criminal syndicates. The popular model of organised crime at the time was a pyramid: poachers at the bottom, kingpins in the middle and buyers on the top. It was dramatic, strangely familiar and emotionally satisfying; it was also completely inaccurate, in the way that normally only Hollywood could get away with. Yet nobody ever questioned it; the very language we used failed to reflect the reality we knew to be true. Models are frequently not entirely useless, but close enough to feel plausible; that is precisely what makes them so dangerous.

The real structure was a horizontal value chain. Horn moved one way; money moved the other. Between them was a web of poachers, handlers, transporters, buyers, corrupt officials, traditional healers, weapons, access, protection and opportunity. Once we mapped the chain properly, the question changed. It was no longer, ‘Who looks most criminal?’ It was, ‘Where does intervention actually change the system?’

That distinction mattered in practice. We identified the significance of specific customs officials and port-of-entry nodes because a small number of people could influence a large volume of product movement. Arresting or disrupting those actors did not merely add another statistic to an enforcement report. It changed the economics and logistics of the chain. It made the product harder to move. It reduced the attractiveness of the route. It helped create a short-term reduction in poaching because criminals no longer had the ability to get horn out and money back through the system.

That looks entirely different from the usual enforcement narrative. The obvious measure of value is activity: arrests, seizures, convictions. These visible outputs photograph well and make the machine look busy. But an arrest at the bottom of the chain can simply remove the most replaceable person in the network. You can spend your resources fighting the easiest part of the system to regenerate while the actual flow of horn continues.

The better question was colder and more useful: where is the lever? In our case, the lever was not always the man with the rifle in the bush. Sometimes it was the quieter person with access, authority or silence at a point through which the product had to pass. That is not as cinematic; it is simply more powerful. Fewer arrests can be a better outcome if the arrests you do make alter the system. That looks like failure if you are counting the wrong thing; it looks like intelligence if you are not.

SECTION 3

Sales, Sales, Sales

Later, a company I worked with manufactured industrial shredders; heavy, dual-shaft machines built to tear uncompromising materials apart. An executive once described our product as the ‘Mercedes-Benz S-Class’ of shredders. It was potent sales perfume; but it bothered me because it was a false signal, and that signal pointed the enterprise toward an illusion of identity.

European competitors already owned that narrative; they built complex, expensive, highly sophisticated machines optimised for European infrastructure, predictable logistics and controlled conditions. Our machines were certainly not that. They were overbuilt, robust and fiercely effective; they were eminently practical and easily repairable in rugged markets where Western alternatives were too distant, too fragile or too expensive. We were not the Mercedes-Benz S-Class; we were the Toyota Hilux.

Once that true value was named, the strategic fog lifted. We no longer needed to waste capital trying to counterfeit luxury engineering; we did not need to sacrifice our build quality by racing cheap imports to the bottom. We finally understood the exact value we were creating for the operator: uptime, resilience, local support, raw mechanical strength and the absolute confidence that the machine would still perform long after the sales brochure had outlived its utility. Ultimately, we provided anxiety reduction.

Unfortunately, the most seductive proxy for corporate success is raw sales volume. Yet an unhealthy obsession with top-line growth can quietly cannibalise the very value you are trying to trade; it looks like beautiful revenue on the way in, only to become a landmine wearing lipstick once it arrives. True value lay not in chasing transactions at any cost, but in protecting the quality of the sale. It meant aligning the customer with the correct machine; safeguarding the operational promise; offering proactive service contracts; and strengthening the localised support network. Volume mattered, but only if it grew organically from the right value proposition. Otherwise, you are not building a market; you are simply feeding a future problem.

SECTION 4

Proxy Masks

Looking back, the pattern is clear: students, syndicates and shredders; grades, arrests and sales. Three different worlds; three respectable measures; three masks.

The danger of a proxy is that it is typically not entirely illogical or flagrantly fatuous. It gives an organisation something quantifiable, a mechanical momentum so it can keep moving. The problems accumulate when the proxy becomes more real than the truth it was meant to represent. Grades are not capability; arrests are not disruption; sales are not value.

The real value usually sits in the shifting relationships between things: between a policy and a client's fear; a poacher and a buyer's money; a machine and the operator on the ground. Value does not sit still; it changes constantly with context, risk and trust.

In retrospect, I can diagnose the first indication that value was being distorted nearby; it always arrived as a mild malaise, a consequence of my annoyingly literal mind refusing to grant the world a minor courtesy. It was that specific itch suggesting a surface explanation did not quite fit, and that something profoundly meaningful lay buried beneath it.

Most organisational actors are not merely bad at recognising this itch; they are actively incentivised to ignore it. They need an answer; preferably an answer impersonating a metric or masquerading as a dashboard.

But a system does not need to be stupid to be wrong. It can be intelligent, energetic, well-funded and beautifully presented while asking increasingly precise questions of the wrong reality.

So, what really matters? What is this valuable outcome we seek?

It is not what is easiest to count, nor is it what is easiest to communicate; it is not what sounds impressive to an audience, nor what the system already knows how to see. Those are merely convenient starting points. What really matters is, annoyingly, value.