

# Profiling: A Good Tool Wrongly Used

March 2007

**David Rubens** is MD of Meido Consultants, a corporate security consultancy.

He holds an MSc in Security and Risk Management from Scarman Institute, Leicester University, and is currently a visiting lecturer there on their Global Security and Policing MSc programme, as well as being a visiting lecturer in the Security and Resilience Department at Cranfield University at the UK Defence Academy.

[david@meidoconsultants.com](mailto:david@meidoconsultants.com)

David Rubens

Meido Consultants Limited

The Arches,  
Maygrove Road  
London NW6 2EE

[info@meidoconsultants.com](mailto:info@meidoconsultants.com)

[www.meidoconsultants.com](http://www.meidoconsultants.com)



---

## Profiling: A Good Tool Wrongly Used

One of the buzz words for the last couple of years across the security spectrum but especially in the GWOT (Global War on Terror) has been 'Profiling'. As is so often the case, what was originally seen as a highly specialised tool that could make a specific contribution to the identification of people with a higher-than-normal likelihood of propensity to terrorist or other undesirable activities has been taken over so that it is now used in ways and situations that are completely out of keeping with its original remit.

In this article I would like to look at what Profiling is, what value it offers to the security professional, and some of the ways in which it has been abused by non-professional security policy-makers.

Profiling, in its broadest sense, means to look at large groups of population and to try and discover indicators of likely or predictable behaviour. For example, an advertising agency will profile the potential buyers of new cars and build their advertising campaign around the research that tells them that the potential buyers of small cheap cars will respond to a certain sort of advertising (young, funky parties, driving along a Californian beach waving to people), whilst potential drivers of high-range executive cars are more attracted to images of power, freedom and being away from the kids.

The science of profiling is a mathematical based model that says that whilst individual behaviour is in itself unpredictable, the actions of groups of people are more likely to fall into recognisable patterns. Thus whilst not all football hooligans are skinheads, a group of skinheads walking down a high street on a Saturday afternoon are more likely to be identified as being a potential for trouble.

Given that potential problems are infinite, and we usually have less resources than we require, within the security role profiling should allow us to be able to concentrate most of our energies on those people who are most likely to pose a potential threat to whatever it is we are safeguarding. This is done by studying general patterns of behaviour and then trying to concentrate that information in order to be able to predict similar patterns of behaviour in increasingly small groups of people.

Profiling can basically be divided in pre-incident and post-incident analyses. Pre-incident analyses gives us an indication of what sort of people are most likely to be involved in any particular activity, so that, for example, in a shopping centre the security team will spend more time monitoring the behaviour of the three skater-kids rather than the middle-aged white lady,

---

and the immigration team at the airport will spend more time questioning a black male from Nigeria than they will a white person from South Africa.

Post-incident use of profiling takes the known facts from any incident and then tries to build a picture of the person who committed that crime. The use of profiling in this manner is probably older than most people realise. Dr Thomas Bond, the police surgeon who examined the victims of Jack the Ripper in London in the 1880's suggested that investigators look for a quiet inoffensive looking man, probably middle aged and neatly dressed.

Obviously, the more information the profiler has on a particular person, and the longer they have to study them, the more personal and specific the information they will be able to infer.

In a famous case from the 1980's, James Brussels, a New York psychiatrist, had letters that the New York Bomber had sent over a sixteen year period, as well as evidence from over thirty explosive packages that he had left across New York City over an eight-year period. He eventually suggested that the bomber would be "...a heavy man. Middle aged. Foreign Born. Roman Catholic. Single. Lives with a brother or sister....When you find him, chances are he will be wearing a double breasted suit. Buttoned". Brussels was so close in his assessment that when he was finally arrested, the arresting officers found him in a double-breasted suit that was buttoned.

So far, so good. The question now becomes, of what use can this be to the operational security manager? The typical way in which it is used will be along the pattern of 'The likelihood is that the terrorist bomber on a plane will be young, Muslim, radical, and probably wearing a beard'. The security team will then identify people who fit that profile, and concentrate their energies on that sub-section of people identified as being potentially high-risk. (This is obviously a simplification – but not by much). There are a number of problems with this system. The obvious one is that it labels a whole sub-section of society as being potentially high-risk offenders, and creates a pre-set range of interactions that are specifically aimed at that general group of people, irrespective of their own specific individual behaviour. The 'Sus [Stop-and-Search / 'Suspicious Behaviour'] Laws of the 1980's are a good example of this sort of stereotyping. The law was based on the Vagrancy act of 1824, which meant that it was illegal for a suspected person to be in a public place with intent to commit an arrestable offence, and basically gave the police the freedom to stop and search anyone they chose on the grounds that they thought that there might be a suspicion that they might commit a crime. This soon became seen as a symbol of abuse of police powers, and was widely seen as a means for the Metropolitan police to target and harass young black men. The Sus Laws were seen as a direct cause of the inner-city riots that took place across the UK in the early 1980's.

Besides the political and social implications of the above, there are two specifically operational considerations that are also important to consider. The first, which is technically the more challenging, states that the whole science /art / voodoo magic of profiling is based on probability and likelihood. 'It is likely that seven out of ten shoplifters fit this profile, and that by concentrating on these sub groups it is likely that we will cut out eighty per cent of shoplifting attempts'. A seventy per cent success rate would be considered spectacularly good when trying to minimise incidents of shoplifting in city centre shopping centres – it would not be a particularly good success rate when trying to stop terrorist bombers!

The second problem is that once the potential terrorist is aware of the suspected profile that the authorities are looking for, they can simply change the sort of people that they use. The success of Israeli security forces in preventing young men from committing acts of suicide terrorism was directly linked to the previously unheard of pattern of the use of Palestinian women and youths to carry suicide bombs into Israeli cities. Radical Islamic suicide bombers have recently included white males ('Shoe Bomber' Richard Reid), black males (Ramzi Mohammed, one of the London 21/07 bombers) and white females (Muriel Degauque, a 38-year old Belgian woman who set off a suicide bomb in Iraq in November 2005).

It is clear that profiling would not have identified these people as high-likelihood suicide bombers, and they would have quite successfully walked through any security team that was looking for a specific sort of 'typical' suicide bomber.

This also means that the people who do not fit the profiling bill and are equally as likely to commit the crime will be even more successful as they are not identified as high-likelihood transgressors. In the examples I gave earlier in the article, statistics tell us that the white South African youth is as likely to be infringing visa regulations as a black African counter-part, and the white middle-aged female shopper is as likely to be apprehended as the skateboarding youths – but the attention that they are given by the respective security teams, whether shopping centre security personnel or immigration officials at the airport, are not in proportion to the reality of their likelihood of offending. Thus, the ineffective use of profiling can actually encourage the growth of offending by other, non-targeted sections of society.

Having highlighted some of the problems associated with the over-reliance on profiling, next month I will give examples of how, if used correctly, profiling can be integrated as an effective tool in helping create more effective security systems.

---

