

Profiling and Security – Part 2

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Last month I looked at some of the ideas that are involved in the security tool known as 'Profiling', and I pointed out that what was originally seen as a very sophisticated method of allowing us to identify potential high-risk transgressors (whether as in football hooliganism, shop lifting or suicide terrorist attacks), has degenerated into what is now often seen as a simplistic methods that allows us to target large sections of the community with little or no understanding of how profiling needs to be fitted into a wider range of security responses in order to be effective.

In fact, as we have seen by the growth of 'non normal' transgressors, such as non-Muslim, non-Arabic suicide bombers, the over-dependence of security teams on profiling can let other people, who are not identified as being of 'high-risk' by the profiling model, slip easily through the net.

One example of this is at a recent conference, a senior 'expert' on police use of profiling stated that as far as he knew, no suicide bomber on a plane had ever flown business class, so he did not see why business class passengers could not be fast-tracked through security as they would not be likely suspects for suicide attacks. It is slightly frightening that this is the level of understanding amongst what are supposed to be expert advisers to government policy makers!

As is always the case, the secret of effective security is to make sure that the basics are in place, rather than depending on a 'magic pill' solution that can miraculously solve all of our problems. The two basics that I would bring to the front of this discussion on the use of profiling is firstly, that all security is about the study of human behaviour, and secondly, the most effective way of using the understanding of humans behaviour is trained, motivated security professionals.

If we look at the classic example of Heathrow Airport over the last year, and especially since the alleged 'Liquid Bomb' plan that I wrote about in a previous column, we can see all of the classic mistakes that an ineffective use of profiling can achieve.

The Liquid Bomb Plot is alleged to have involved a number of people who were planning to smuggle liquids aboard a number of planes, which they would then combine in order to create an explosive device capable of bringing the plane down from out of the skies.

Leaving aside all question of whether this plot actually existed, and if so how credible the threat was, let us look at the reaction of the relevant authorities to these alleged threats, and specifically let us look at whether the security responses that they brought in to play

(and which are still disrupting the lives of air travellers all over the world), have in fact made us any safer.

As anyone who has been through Heathrow airport recently knows, it is an experience that consists of hours of standing mindlessly in queues, going through interminable security checks, having to remove belts and shoes, not being allowed to take shampoo, drinking water or deodorants (if they are over 100ml) on board the plane, plus a myriad of other small and petty disturbances that seem, from the travellers perspective at least, to have no other purpose than to ensure that when you finally do get on board the plane everyone is angry, frustrated and vowing to cut back on future flying experiences whenever possible. So, what is the purpose of these security measures, and do they at least achieve their objectives?

The authorities would tell us that they have identified a potential threat – the use of liquids to blow up planes, and that they are introducing security measures that would prevent that from happening.

But what is the purpose of the terrorists? It is surely to create terror by making high-profile public attacks, and in so doing to disrupt to the greatest degree the international transport system. So what we then have is the situation of tens of thousands of people hanging around for hours in a public, open-access, non-secured area, where surely it would be easy for the terrorists to simply turn up with their backpacks and blow up the main holding area together with hundreds of travellers from all over the world. You can only imagine the impact that would have made as images of screaming people, mutilated bodies and mass panic are put on repeat loops on every media channel on the planet.

Besides that, it is still true that of the 67 million passengers that pass through Heathrow airport each year, if only 0.0001% were potential terrorist, that would still mean that 67,000 people were worthy of greater inspection. What the present programme does is to treat each passenger, irrespective of age, gender, or background as equally suspicious. The fact that international transport has been disrupted to such a degree is proof of the concept not only of asymmetrical warfare (ie using a relatively small amount of force in order to influence the actions of a much larger force), but of the 'Risk That Never Happened'. It is no longer terrorism that has an effect on our security, but the fear of terrorism – whether justified or not.

So, how would profiling help in this instance? Firstly, as stated above, profiling is just one tool that must be used in conjunction with a much wider range of security measures, and which must be used by people who are highly trained in its use.

Given that it is almost impossible to 'bluff' normal behaviour when you are in a non-normative state of fear, anxiety, etc (remember how successful you were when you tried to lie to your Mum!), the purpose of the security operation is to create situations where that non-normative behaviour becomes easily identifiable, eg. if someone is acting in a nervous, agitated, stressed manner, walking around nervously, sweating, etc. The problem with the above system as used at Heathrow is that it creates exactly that behaviour in every single person who comes through. How many times have you seen a businessmen or young mother getting angry and frustrated and shouting at the security team because they have got to take their shoes off or have to take a sleeping baby out of the buggy. The security team then ignore that behaviour – and similar behaviour that might be an indication that someone else may have terrorist activities on their mind.

One further point. What is the purpose of the body search? Is it to try and find something connected to terrorism? No, because we don't know what it is we are looking for. The purpose of that search is to put that person under extra pressure, so that by studying their behaviour we will get an effective idea of whether they have something to hide. It may well not be connected to terrorism (in fact, it is almost certainly not), but it does allow the security team to identify someone who is worth spending a bit more time over. Yet how many times have you seen a security person look up from the chat they have been having with their colleague, and then in a bored way run the metal detector over the suspect person and let them through, without once actually looking at them. Their idea is that if the metal detector doesn't beep, then there is no danger.

One final thought to allow you to sleep easily before you take your next flight. If the security at Heathrow, and at all other airports, is so effective, how was it that a Russian hitman, at the absolute peak of security scares on international airlines, was able to walk through the international airport security systems carrying highly toxic radioactive material, and then wander around London leaving a radioactive trail behind him in restaurants, hotels and bars, before finally poisoning Russian dissident Alexander Litvinenko in a Japanese restaurant. Imagine what would have happened if that had been an Islamic terrorist with a vial of Ebiola, Black Death or just your common or garden radioactive nuclear waste, and whether the security systems that we have in place would have been any more effective at stopping them than it was our Russian friends.

