

Drowning not waving: after 40 years of neglect, what now should be done to develop police intelligence practice in Britain?

BSC Policing Network at <https://bscpolicingnetwork.com/2016/10/07/drowning-not-waving-after-40-years-of-neglect-what-now-should-be-done-to-develop-police-intelligence-practice-in-britain/>

I have been studying police intelligence practice for about 16 years (see James, 2016, 2014, 2012, and 2003). It has been a fascinating, intriguing, and frustrating journey in almost equal measure. Perhaps the thing I have found most frustrating is that after more than 40 years of scholarly research, police-led research and 'official' inquiries into criminal intelligence work, that practice looks very much the same today as it did in 1975.

The Audit Commission (1993) was a significant actor in stimulating interest in the subject, but insider-led scrutiny of criminal intelligence work began with the Baumber Inquiry (ACPO, 1975). This was followed by the Pearce Report (ACPO, 1978); the Ratcliffe Report (ACPO, 1986), the 1997 report *Policing with Intelligence* (HMIC); the Bichard Inquiry (Home Office, 2004); the *National Intelligence Model Review* (to which I made a small contribution) (ACPO, 2014) right the way through to *Building the picture: An inspection of police information management* (HMIC, 2015). These are some of the most significant inquiries but I doubt this is an exhaustive list.

Of course, some things have changed. There is increasing specialisation in criminal intelligence work as well as a proliferation of intelligence assessments and sundry other analytical products. But, largely, these changes are presentational. Even if they have shaped practice at the margins, I question whether they have influenced policing in anything other than the most superficial of ways. Certainly, what really mattered to Baumber (and to a great extent to both Pearce and Ratcliffe) in terms of the development of a suitably professional and capable intelligence workforce – a collective vision for intelligence; common understanding of the intelligence basics; improved training and selection procedures that put the best and most experienced staff into those important positions – have not been delivered. I argue that is because, despite the rhetoric to the contrary, the institution has never truly accepted the case for them.

In previous publications, I have attributed this to human factors; the negative impacts of institutional conservatism, managers' self-interest and professional subcultures (see James, 2016). I have also reflected on the extent to which there is an identity crisis in the intelligence world; left to its own devices has it lost sight of its *raison d'être*? Perhaps, it is able only to focus on its own part of the business, without concerning itself with the external realities; the police organization's unswerving commitment to action over reflection, its rejection of existentialism in favour of pragmatism. It may

be more accurate to say that an indifferent executive has not allowed it to concern itself with those external realities by side-lining it from meaningful involvement in the decision-making process – that certainly was a significant factor in the story of the NIM (see James, 2013).

I remain convinced that these realities are hugely significant factors in this environment and are detrimental to the development both of the work and the workforce but the more I reflect on the issues, the more I wonder if these are just very obvious symptoms of bigger problems rather than the problems themselves. Recently, I have been exploring that idea with a colleague from the Finnish Police University. Our dialogue increasingly has focused on classic analyses of bureaucracies. Weber (1947) argued that bureaucracies are wired to become increasingly specialized precision instruments. Largely, their aim is not to fit better with the pieces of a larger puzzle but to achieve excellence in their own right. When the task is unclear, the bureaucracy loses its identity and floats without purpose. Perhaps, that is where the intelligence world finds itself today. Weber said that to exercise control, bureaucratic administrations relied on a combination of technical and experiential knowledge, which itself was a product of the “‘striving’ for power”, characteristic of bureaucratic organisations (1947 p.339).

By that analysis, arguably, what we are witnessing here in the intelligence milieu is a natural development of the institution in which significant efforts to reshape the *status quo* through ‘revolutionary’ schemes such as: the first recorded intelligence-led policing initiative, the Aberdeen Policing Experiment; the Unit Beat Policing experiment of the 1960s, the Kent Policing Model (the precursor of the NIM) and the NIM itself (see James, 2013), have consciously (or unconsciously) been disdained for fear that in the long run they may have unknown and unintended consequences, more detrimental to the institution or to the individuals who wield power within it or to the communities it serves (not necessarily in that order).

Both Robert Reiner (2012) and Ben Bowling (2007) have argued persuasively that we should recognise the limits of policing. Bowling suggests that ‘good enough’ policing is as much as we reasonably can expect from the institution. Should we apply that same caveat to police intelligence practice? I am in complete agreement with Reiner and Bowling on the need for a kind of reality check on police capabilities but it seems to me that ‘good enough’ is only an acceptable aim when it can be demonstrated that the organisation and its individual members actually are doing their best, working efficiently, effectively, and ethically to provide the services that stakeholders and communities expect and need. For all the energy expended by the institution in the context of crime and criminality, the evidence suggests that it may be working hard enough, but in failing to make the best use of its intelligence, it is not working smart enough. As the reader has seen, identifying the root causes of these inefficiencies will be difficult; as the last 40 years have shown, resolving them may be much, much harder.