

Memex

Knowledge v Intelligence

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While it may sound faintly heretical, there is possibly an argument to be made that intelligence-led policing is not quite the Holy Grail of modern policing.

Before colleagues, past and present, start to question my logic, I should add that, in general, I have no concern with what UK police forces are trying to achieve. However, I do believe we need better tools to deliver on the promise of intelligence-led policing (ILP) and also wonder whether this activity/ process should be more focused on being 'knowledge' led.

As my Memex colleague Stephen G. Serrao has previously noted (<http://tiny.cc/KVKfx>) the established view of leading writers on the subject such as Dr Jerry Ratcliffe sees ILP as both a business model and management philosophy focused on the importance of data analysis and crime intelligence in reducing and preventing criminal acts. Crucially, ILP must be understood as not being about intelligence-gathering but rather a process and a philosophy determining actions.¹

But what about that activity that could perhaps best be described as knowledge-led policing?

Like many in the Service, I am more than happy to reinforce the importance of intelligence. But the fact is that there will always be more to ILP than information gathering and analysis.

In the early days (mid-1990s), 'intelligence led' was undoubtedly the correct label, as amassing information was far from easy and the vital intelligence input (analysed information) was at the heart of the 'target packages' which gave structure to pro-active operations. But how far has ILP really moved us on from the situation where investigation-led intelligence was the norm?

Yes, the scope is greater and the approach more evolved and yes, the 21st century's policing environment is more conducive to ILP, but paradoxically, the more time and effort forces invest in intelligence-gathering activity, the larger the potential gap between the product of this endeavour and the mass of information forces are actually obliged to use. There is no doubt that our intelligence gathering functions continue to be vital, but there is a requirement to manage this as part of the totality of the corporate information - information maintained by forces, as well as that made available by partners.

Most critically, there is a need to use the information and analysis retained in a more effective manner. Perhaps in the same way there is a long-held distinction between intelligence and wisdom, there is a need to separate intelligence and knowledge; knowledge involving how that intelligence (incorporating analysis and reason) is utilised, with critical judgement and common sense applied.

¹ What is intelligence-led policing? <http://www.jratcliffe.net/research/ilp.htm>

As Christopher Bruce, president of the International Association of Crime Analysts, has argued (<http://www.iaca.net>) even information sharing on its own will not reveal all the important patterns to deliver an effective service. Forces need to consider a range of issues in relation to information: from who needs to know what we know and how will other departments or forces know what is important to us, to why is it actually important and how will they use it?

It may be easier to view the subject from the perspective of pro-active force operations, where there is often huge analytical commitment to marshal information on any given subject from many disparate systems. Predictably, for most (if not all) organisations this presents a real challenge, with organisational IT systems evolving in silos, making it difficult to share data and ensure quality communication between systems. When we factor in the legislative complexity of partner working (for example, with local authority social work or housing departments) this difficulty is multiplied.

I appreciate that for some there may be few revelations here, and equally recognise that UK forces have made significant progress in sharing required information internally and with partners. However, it could reasonably be argued that the progress made to date has largely been in the idea of a commitment to co-operate and share. Unfortunately, there remain considerable challenges in introducing an effective physical (IT-related) means by which this can be achieved.

This progress also has to happen in a manner that supports and streamlines operational activity and not through 'work around' activities which often increase the burden on already-overstretched staff. Not only does the transfer of information between departments or forces need to be handled in an efficient manner (from a service delivery perspective incorporating current policy, legislation and best practice, etc), but it should not burden officers with unnecessary recording and reporting, with useful or even essential form-filling and box ticking being confused with 'effective' information gathering.

Officers are more than familiar with the plethora of supplementary forms that can follow an initial report, such as a Vulnerable Person Report following a Crime Report, and will recognise the frustration of having to duplicate both data and effort.

On a practical level, information technology solutions exist in the form of enterprise, fusion (solutions that merge data from disparate systems) and workflow products to help with the management of information and it is very encouraging to see an increasing number of forces throughout the UK investing in these technologies. That said, progress on considering wider information sharing practices is still slow and internal information silos continue to hamper policing. While this situation prevails, UK forces will continue to be vulnerable to failures in their management and in the use of information resources.

When police forces get it wrong, media criticism of the failure to make use of information they possess will often focus on the problem that the right hand did not know what the left was doing. One current example of this situation was the high-profile Leicestershire case, where the mother of a severely-disabled child, distraught in her belief that the

police had failed to protect her from years of abuse by local youths, took her own life and that of her child.

Unfortunately the press is never likely to run short of, often emotive, material, showing the tragic result of failures to make the association between disparate events or arguably worse, having made the connection, mismanaged the situation. Given the complexity of information gathering, collation, analysis and determined actions, such failures – potentially portrayed in the press as systemic ones – are always likely to occur and be deemed to highlight the inability of forces to connect related incidents and respond effectively to protect individuals, and by extension, to ensure the safety of the wider community.

Such a case is raised as an example only and not to make any comment on the performance of Leicestershire Constabulary. All forces perfectly understand the inherent complexity of personal and social situations. However, it does, in a not atypical way, highlight the information management challenges facing the police service.

At the outset of this article, I questioned the appropriateness use of the term 'intelligence-led policing' and emphasised how the term 'knowledge-led policing' might better capture the importance of using the totality of information. My argument, however, is not about semantics or accepted terminology. It is merely to highlight that successful information management, and by extension successful ILP, is not just about information collection, collation and analysis, but about how information is viewed and utilised. That's where the concept of 'knowledge-led' policing comes into play.

Modern IT systems can be of great assistance in applying the corporate knowledge.

To return to the Leicestershire example, it would not have been unreasonable to expect background systems to be able to identify the escalation of risk through characteristics such as incident categorisation or repeat victimisation. Furthermore, having identified such circumstances, the system should be capable of ensuring the best possible response by; mandating specific actions, providing operational advice and automating notification to supervisory and specialist resources.

While the appropriate response is for the Force to determine, it should reflect their internal knowledge of how to fulfill their function and provide effective policing.

When it comes to effective enforcement and service delivery, and we reflect on what ILP is ultimately trying to achieve (beyond its key role in strategic management) filling all the various police or partner organisations' silos and databases in the UK will not result in vastly more efficient police forces. Just as a little information can be a dangerous thing, having access to a lot of information can be equally damaging if you don't really know what to do with it.

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