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An Analysis of the Public Reporting to Lothian and Borders Police on Perceived Terrorism-Related Matters after the Glasgow Airport Terrorist Attack in 2007

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Abstract

The Glasgow Airport terrorist attack of 2007 led to the initiation of a Lothian and Borders Police operation to investigate an expected increase in the public reporting of terrorism-related matters. This paper considers the two specific areas of data in respect of these reports: the reporters and the information they imparted. An analysis of reporter characteristics is undertaken, highlighting areas of interest concerning age, employment and place of birth. The information imparted to the police is then analysed with particular aspects of reporting identified, primarily the activity the subject was undertaking, with sub-analysis of ethnicity of subjects and premises cited. The influence of the media is also considered. The conclusions centre on the prevalence of Asian subjects in the reporting, an apparent lack of minority reporters and the nature of the public implications concerning terrorist activity as opposed to overt expressions of the nature of suspicions.

Introduction

Much effort has been made since the attacks of September 11th 2001 to engage with the general populace of Western nations in an effort to encourage reporting of suspicious activity that may be connected to terrorism. The Contest [1] and Contest 2 [2] strategies of the Government of the United Kingdom in particular show the efforts that are being taken by Government to combat Al Qaeda-inspired radicalisation leading to terrorist activity.

In their paper 'Policing Terrorism', Kelling and Bratton (2006) spell out how crucial the citizenry is in detecting terrorist activity, citing an example where

In the summer of 2004... the NYPD was able to disrupt a planned bombing of the Herald Square subway station just days before the Republican national convention, based on information received from the local community. [3]

Other powerful examples of citizens supplying crucial information are also cited in the article.

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Although members of the public appear key to identifying terrorist activity and consequently great efforts are being made to encourage their participation, there does not appear to have been any extensive academic work in relation to identifying the current picture of reporting. In respect of this, the first apparent question is who amongst the public is contacting the police with concerns arising from activity they suspect may be linked to terrorist activity? Secondly, what activity are they reporting and who is undertaking this activity? Finally, the question of what motivations or driving factors, if any other than conventional suspicion, are causing the public to contact the police to report suspected terrorist-linked activity?

In light of the UK Government's recently restated strategic aims concerning minority community contact with the police, this is an area of particular relevance. It is an issue that has been considered in the past, albeit in relation to conventional crime. Davis and Henderson (2003) considered the issue of a perception of low level of reporting to police by immigrants, thought to be engendered through bad experiences in origination countries coupled with misunderstandings experienced in any dealings with the police of their new country, further exacerbated by language and cultural difficulties. They found social cohesion was a key factor in promoting contact with the police but that

many immigrants tend to settle in ethnically heterogeneous, high-crime, urban neighbourhoods – exactly the kinds of communities likely to promote apathy, a low sense of collective efficacy and a lack of social cohesion[4],

fostering a reluctance to report crime.

The issue of the perceived reluctance of sections of the Muslim community to contact police have been considered recently. Spalek, El Awa and McDonald (2009) found when conducting research on the topic that their evidence suggested

that one of the main reasons for some Muslims not to have taken a proactive role in supporting counter-terrorism was the British role in the highly contested 'War on Terror' – a synonym for a war on Islam in many minds .[5]

They concluded that greater engagement with Muslim communities was required to ensure that terrorism was perceived as a crime and not an activity clouded in the theological propaganda circulated by Al Qaeda and the like.

Background to Circumstances of Data Collection

Lothian and Borders Police is Scotland's second largest police force, covering an area of 6467 square kilometres.[6] In 2007, the population of the force area was estimated to be 904,970. It was also estimated that 18% of the total of Scotland's ethnic minority population live in the



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Lothian and Borders Police area[7]. The main centre of population is Scotland's capital, the city of Edinburgh.

On Saturday 30th June 2007, a burning Cherokee Jeep loaded with material intended to act as an explosive device was intentionally driven into the main terminal building at Glasgow Airport. Immediately thereafter, Lothian and Borders Police, the neighbouring Police Force to Strathclyde Police, where the incident occurred, formed a team of detectives to provide mutual aid. The mutual aid was not ultimately required; however, an executive decision was taken to retain the team that had been formed. It had been surmised by senior officers of Lothian and Borders Police that an increase in reporting on terrorism related matters from the public was likely following the attack and the connected attempted attacks that had taken place in London.

Consequently, the team of detectives formed an operational unit, named 'Operation Mainsail'. During the period the operation was live Operation Mainsail were concerned with reports received by Lothian and Borders Police that members of the public, henceforth referred to as 'reporters', thought related to possible terrorist activity. If control room staff receiving a report believed that it concerned terrorist-related activity it was directed to Operation Mainsail. Finally, a member of office staff within the Operation Mainsail team scanned all public reporting received by the force on a daily basis and took ownership of any reports that they thought concerned possible terrorist-related activity. With this checking mechanism in place, it was thought that all reports from the public in relation to terrorism-related activity would be captured.

This paper concerns public reporting only, and as a consequence the data presented does not encapsulate that gathered or investigated as a result of any police intelligence activity that may have been ongoing during the dates in question.

The operation ran for two months and concluded on 31st August 2007.

Analysis

Statements had been noted from all persons who provided information falling within the conventional remit of Operation Mainsail. Statements noted by officers of Lothian and Borders Police generally contain the full particulars of the reporter in addition to a full account of what they wish to inform the Police about. It was determined that these statements then would provide the necessary research base from which it could be determined what information was being provided and by whom.

A total of 107 statements were found to have been taken during the course of 'Operation Mainsail'. Of these, 16 were found to have been compiled by police officers in relation to actions they had undertaken during investigations, and three were noted from civilian witnesses as follow-up work in relation to matters reported to the police. These were subtracted from the

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statements analysed, and the remaining 88 statements were analysed in detail in respect of reporter information.

Eighty-two statements were found to contain information in respect of the sex of the reporter. Of these, 51 were found to be male (62% of those disclosed), while 31 (38% of those disclosed) were female. There was no obvious explanation for the prevalence of male reporters.

The total mean age from the 80 statements where information on both age and sex was available was found to be 41.79 years, with the mean age amongst males at 40.84 years and the mean age amongst females at 44.13 years. The youngest male reporter was aged 19 years, the oldest 74 years. The youngest female reporter was aged 12 years, the oldest 73 years. Standard deviation for the overall sample where age was available was 13.58443.

The age distribution amongst reporters is outlined in Figure 1 below:

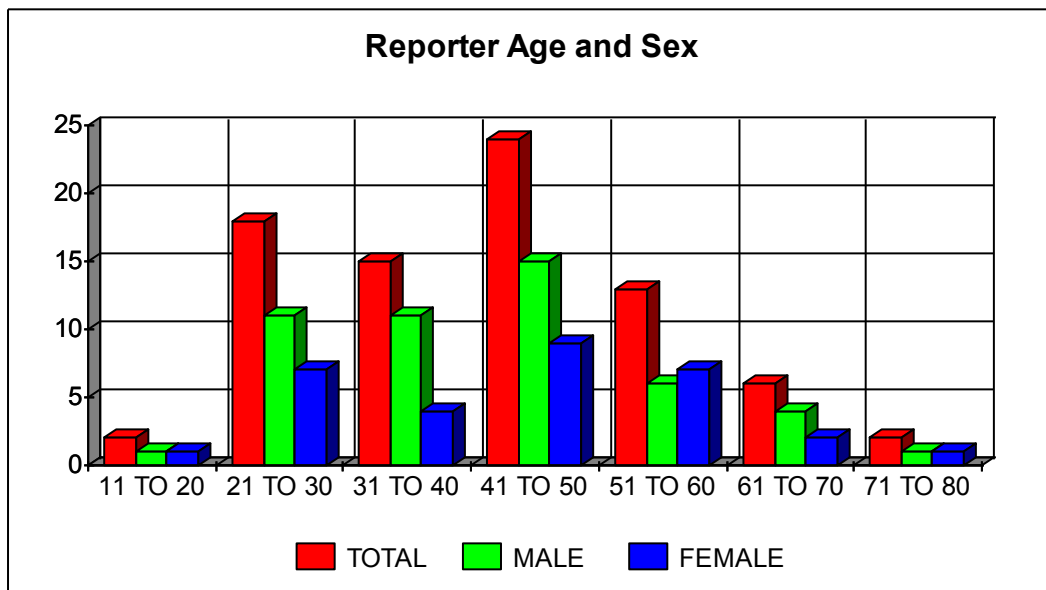


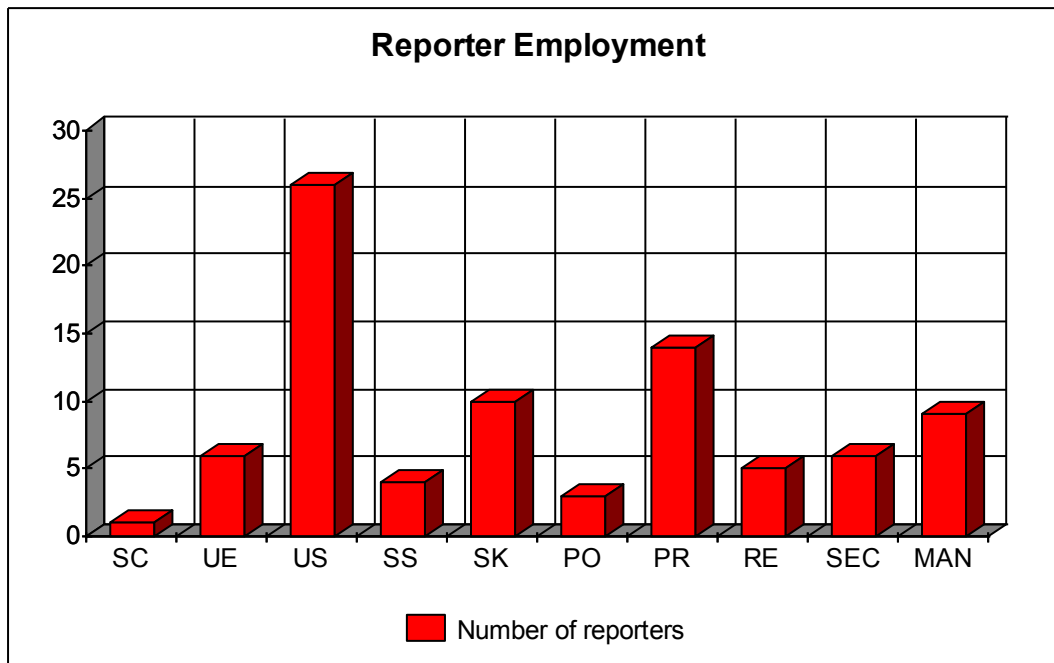
Figure 1: Reporter Age and Sex

As is illustrated and provided in the means information above, reporting from teenagers was extremely low. The 41 to 50 age bracket contained the greatest population, corresponding with the data concerning mean ages.

The employment characteristics of the 84 reporters, where this information was available, is outlined in graph form for comparison below in figure 2:

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Key: SC – School; UE – Unemployed; US – Unskilled; SS – Shop Staff; SK – Skilled; PO – Police Officers; PR – Professional; RE – Retired; SEC – Secretarial; MAN – Management

Unskilled workers were found to have contributed the biggest single share of reporters (31%), while notably only a small number of reporters were found to be unemployed (7%).

The police officers included above made their reports to Lothian and Borders Police in respect of matters they witnessed while off duty and the procedures adopted in respect of them were found to be identical to those adopted in respect of members of the public.

In respect of 75 reporters, information regarding place of birth was available. This is outlined in Figure 3 below:

Place of Birth	Total
Scotland	61
England	6
Wales	1
Holland	1
Belgium	1

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Poland	1
Australia	1
India	1
USA	1
Ghana	1

Figure 3: Place of Birth (Reporter)

The overwhelming majority of reporters where the information was available (91%) were born in the United Kingdom (UK).

Of the witnesses born in the UK only one was noted to have a non UK-traditional forename and surname.

The non-availability of antecedent information in a number of instances appears to be due to police officer oversight and non-deliberate in nature.

No data existed in respect of the ethnicity or religion of reporters as it was not a criteria noted by police officers.

Subject Information

Of the 88 reports made, it was found that there were 13 instances where more than one statement had been noted in respect of the same report, that is, multiple reporters to one piece of subject information. These multiple instances ranged in number from two to five witness statements concerning the same information. Careful checks were made to ensure that each multiple report contained information that would be coded in the same manner, with this being found to be the case in respect of all 13 instances. This synthesis of multiple reports resulted in there being a total of 61 individual reports of subject information that were to be coded.

The reports were examined collectively in order that the latent themes could be identified and coded. The entire text from each subject report was summarised in order that a general picture of theme could be gathered and then appropriately broken down into categories. This resulted in the identification of eight latent themes. These were: Hostile Reconnaissance (HR); Glasgow Airport (GA); Improvised Explosive Device (IED); Neighbours Behaving Oddly (NBO); Landlord Suspicions (LS); Customer Behaving Oddly (CBO); Internet Activity (IA); and Suspicious Activity (SA). The use of these codes enabled each entry to be referred to by one code only.

A rationale for each theme's application to the individual subject reports was then determined and these were as follows:

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Hostile Reconnaissance (HR) was applied where the theme of the statement was such that it appeared to the reporter that the subject of the report was involved in gathering information as to the construction and or use of a particular building, arousing their suspicions.

Glasgow Airport (GA) was applied where the statement showed a direct reference to the attacks themselves. This was generally a reporter wishing to provide information in respect of the Jeep Cherokee utilised by the attackers but also included a report by a person present during the attack on Glasgow airport.

Improvised Explosive Device (IED) was applied where the theme of the statement was that the reporter had seen a person within the subject information in possession of materials that may be used for the construction of an IED, or knew/suspected that a person referred to within the subject information was making efforts to obtain such materials.

Neighbours Behaving Oddly (NBO) was applied where the theme of the statement showed a general level of suspicion in relation to the reporter's neighbours. This was represented by subject information that contained reference to a disproportionate number of callers to the house, constantly closed curtains, odd noises and such.

Landlord Suspensions (LS) was applied where the theme of the statement showed that a subject's landlord viewed their behaviour as odd in relation to how they conducted themselves within the tenancy and financial arrangements in respect of their rent.

Customer Behaving Oddly (CBO) was applied where the theme of the statement was that a reporter was engaged in their normal working practices and encountered a subject who through their behaviour in relation to the business in question aroused suspicion.

Internet Activity (IA) was applied where the subject report related to the suspicions of the reporter being raised by activity on the Internet. This included postings of an inflammatory nature.

Suspicious Activity (SA) was applied where the statement was unique in nature, in terms of this study, however related to generally suspicious activity on the part of the subject. Examples where this criterion was applied are: a male subject appearing nervous and clutching a rucksack on public transport; hill walkers encountering a group of males in a remote location involved in some form of collective training; the fraudulent purchase of mobile telephone SIM cards; and a person collecting for charity with an ulterior motive.

The breakdown of the population of each of these categories is outlined in Figure 4 below:

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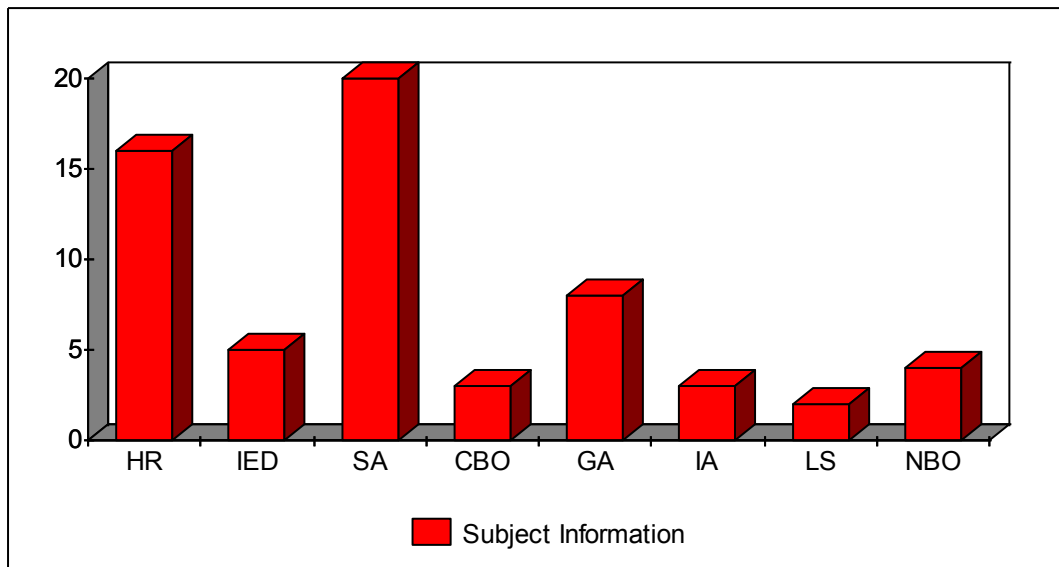


Figure 4: Subject Information

Key: HR – Hostile Reconnaissance; LS – Landlord’s Suspicions; IA – Internet Activity; CBO – Customer Behaving Oddly; GA – Glasgow Airport; SA- Suspicious Activity; IED – Improvised Explosive Device; NBO – Neighbour Behaving Oddly

Although Suspicious Activity is the biggest contributor, this category’s status as an amalgam of unique circumstances must be borne in mind. Hostile Reconnaissance is particularly noteworthy in its prevalence in 16 (26 %) of reports.

From the reading of all the subject reports a number of specific points of information were identified. The ethnicity of subjects was described in a number of statements, as were specific places and actions. In addition to this the driver for reporting was also disclosed in a number of statements.

Firstly, Figure 5 details ethnicity of subjects, where given:

	Asian	Arabic	White	Dark European
HR	9	1	1	1
GA	1			
IED	3			
NBO	1			

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LS	1			
CBO	1			
IA		1		
SA	12	3	1	
Total	28	5	1	1

Figure 5: Ethnicity of Subjects

With 28 (46%) of the total reports referring to Asian persons in the subject information, this is by far the largest ethnic group reported on. At 80% of the total where ethnicity has been described, this information is of particular note.

Figure 6 details where reference was made to specific premises, or type of premises:

	Edinburgh Airport	Torness Power Station	Forth Road Bridge	Entertainment Location
HR	4		1	3
LS		1		
SA	3			
Total	7	1	1	3

Figure 6: Premises Specified in Reporting

In the Hostile Reconnaissance category, eight reports were also found to refer specifically to the subject taking photographs or using a camera during their suspicious activity.

The driving factor reporters provided as their source of motivation for reporting was given as media coverage in 22 (36%) of the reports. This was broken down into two specific areas, firstly the media coverage of the Glasgow attack itself and the attempted attacks in London that immediately preceded it, and secondly media coverage of terrorism in general terms. Figure 7 outlines the categories that references to media coverage as a motivating factor were found within:

	Glasgow/London Attack Media Coverage	Media Coverage of Terrorism in General
HR	3	
GA	6	

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SA	10	3
Total	19	3

Figure 7: Reports Detailing Media Coverage as a Motivational Factor

No statements made reference to any Government campaign or information as being the motivating factor in the reporter contacting the police.

Amongst the 61 subject information reports there were also found to be five direct references to areas of interest. In one 'Landlord Suspicion' report there was a direct reference to terrorism, while within the category 'Suspicious Activity' there was one direct reference to terrorism, one direct reference to the Taliban and two direct references to Al Qaeda.

In the vast majority of reports (82%), there was found to be no direct reference to terrorism or groups associated with terrorism. The reports in the main simply outlined facts, what the reporter had seen, and the reporter thereafter made no direct link to any activity beyond their own experience. The consequent suspicion that the activity described may be related to terrorist activity on the part of the reporter, police control room staff or Operation Mainsail screening officer, was implied through the content of the report rather than explicitly stated.

Conclusion

The data gained from the analysis of the archive material in respect of Operation Mainsail does provide an interesting picture of the public reporting to Lothian and Borders Police following the Glasgow Airport terrorist attack of 2007.

Particular features of note have emerged through the study. The prevalence of Asian subjects in almost half of all reports appears particularly striking. When one considers that only 35 reports describe ethnicity with 80% of these reports describing Asian subjects this information becomes particularly noteworthy. This has to be qualified with the estimate that 18% of Scotland's ethnic minority population reside in the Lothian and Borders Police Force area and that the country's main tourist attractions lie there. Set against this, the figure does still seem high, given that 82% of the area's home population are not from a minority group and that Asians will only be a contributor to the 18%.

The Contest 2 strategy seeks to encourage greater engagement with the authorities by minority communities, specifically the Muslim community. Measurement of the success of this strategy will be difficult. Were reporters' particulars to be noted in detail by the police per se, including factors not featuring in this study, such as religion, then over time figures suitable for future comparison work would be obtainable. These figures, if obtained, could show not only raw information in respect of an increase or decrease in reporting from groups of interest but also

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follow through the qualitative aspects of the reporting and subject area, examples being the accuracy of reporting when investigated and the activity the reporting concerned. Any efforts in this regard would need to be handled delicately in order to avoid contributing to the dangerous manner in which, in some ways, the Muslim community is seen as a ‘suspect community’ or ‘problem group’[8].

With just over a quarter of all reports highlighting hostile reconnaissance activity the awareness of the public of an activity that until recently was unlikely to provoke interest is also worthy of note. Only three accounts cited media coverage of the Glasgow airport attacks as the motivating factor in Hostile Reconnaissance reports. However, awareness of this aspect of terrorist activity is new, and the low figure citing the media has to be qualified with knowledge that the police when noting statements in relation to suspected terrorist activity would not be explicitly gathering information as to motivating factors. Given this aspect of police practice, the number of statements overall that cite media influence as the motivating factor is surprising to the researcher, and implies how much of an influence on reporter behaviour this factor was overall. Government information in relation to counter terrorism may generally be gathered by the public through media reporting of the Government’s policies, hence the lack of citation of Government information and instead the citing of the media as influential.

Although ethnicity and religious information was not available to the study the lack of any substantial number of non-UK-born reporters, particularly reporters of Asian sub-continent origin, is also of interest. Although an individual’s name can only give a clue to their ethnicity, there was only one non-standard-Western name detected amongst all reporters, suggesting an overall lack of reporters with a non-Western European ancestry. In respect of the Muslim community, this facet perhaps does indicate a lack of contact with Lothian and Borders Police over the issue of counter terrorism during the course of the operation, although this is only a suggestion. With the information available, it is obvious that one is far from able to draw any conclusion as to whether this was the case: however, it is worthy that the issue is highlighted. Although writing concerning the United States, Davis and Henderson, when considering the difficulties in relation to immigrant reporting to Police, make a point equally relevant to the United Kingdom that “gaining the cooperation of immigrants in crime reporting and police activities is important because their numbers are large and growing.” [9] This study did not have the scope to consider the overall status of Lothian and Borders ethnic minority communities, but the difficulties considered by Spalek et al. and Davis and Henderson may be equally relevant to the force area, given the general lack of information from immigrant communities reported to Lothian and Borders Police.

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The low number of direct references to terrorism, Al Qaeda and the Taliban was notable. There were, after all, only five direct references to these subjects during a counter terrorist operation involving the gathering of information from the public. The general theme of the statements though was one of implication, that the reporter wished to impart information but, as their knowledge did not, generally, reach beyond suspicion, they in no way wished to make deductions as to what observed behaviour might mean, what its overall purpose could be.

Overall, the data gathered during the research presents an interesting picture of the reporters contacting Lothian and Borders Police during the period specified and further to this, a varied and noteworthy account of the information they supplied.

Further Research

Operation Mainsail was unique in its approach within Lothian and Borders and consequently the data available cannot be compared to similar data in respect of reporting either before or after the dates it covered. Other police data collection methods could be looked at for research of a similar nature, which could provide a continuing picture of reporter information and this is being considered as a future research project by the author.

In respect of Operational Mainsail, the data held could be researched further, in particular concerning outcomes. This is a project the author intends to return to in future.

Martin Gallagher is a serving Detective Sergeant with Lothian and Borders Police. His background is primarily the investigation of serious crime and he was the outside enquiry manager on Operation Mainsail. He is currently in the final year of a Master of Literature in Terrorism Studies at the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, St. Andrews University.

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