THE DEVIL IN THE DETAILS

British intelligence and futility of mass data collection

Teun van Dongen

July 2014

After more than ten years and in spite of no fewer than five parliamentary and independent reviews, Tony Blair's former government and the British intelligence community are still under fire for their performance during the run-up to the Iraq War.[1] The latest development in this seemingly endless saga is the push from parliamentarians and the media for the publication of the final report of the Chilcot Inquiry.[2] According to leaks from within the Inquiry, the report will contain hard evidence that the intelligence about Iraq's WMD programme was consciously misrepresented to justify a decision that had already been taken.[3] Thus, the role of the intelligence community in the months preceding the Iraq War was to settle a political debate by coming up with incontrovertible and conclusive evidence that Saddam Hussein indeed possessed a WMD-programme.

A similar yearning for hard evidence could be gleaned from that other recent British intelligence failure, the London Bombings of July 7, 2005. Various inquiries into the performance of MI5, the British security service, showed that they had information about two of the perpetrators, who had on various occasions been seen associating with known radicals and terrorists.[4] From this, many concluded that the London Bombings could have been prevented. While this reading was disputed by the Intelligence and Security Committee, the parliamentary committee overseeing the work of the British intelligence agencies, the debate was firmly grounded in the assumption that MI5 has to dig up irrefutable evidence for terrorist plots.[5]

---

[1] The matter has been looked into by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Commons, the Intelligence and Security Committee, Lord Hutton and a Committee of Privy Counsellors, whose efforts are often called the Butler Review, after the committee's chairman Lord Robin Butler of Rockwell. See respectively *The Decision to Go to War in Iraq* (London: House of Commons, Foreign Affairs Committee, 2003); *Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction – Intelligence and Assessments* (London: Intelligence and Security Committee, 2003); J.B.E. Hutton, *Report of the Inquiry into the Circumstances Surrounding the Death of Dr David Kelly C.M.G.* (London: The Stationary Office, 2004); *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction: Report of a Committee of Privy Counsellors* (London: The Stationary Office, 2004). The fifth review is the Chilcot Inquiry, which is currently being finalised.

[2] M. Holehouse, "Chilcot Inquiry: MPs Demand Explanation for Four Year Delay of Report on Iraq War," *Telegraph*, May 30, 2014.

[3] A. Gilligan, "How Chilcot Could 'Slap the Cuffs' on Tony Blair," Telegraph, January 25, 2014.

[4] M. Gilmore, "7/7 Revisited: The Question of 'Preventability,'" *RUSI Journal* 155, no. 5 (2010): 35–36.

[5] For the ISC's take on this, see *Could 7/7 Have Been Prevented? Review of the Intelligence on the London Terrorist Attacks on 7 July 2005*, Cm 7617 (London: Intelligence and Security Committee, 2009), 40–42.

The possible deception in the intelligence assessments of Iraq's WMD programme aside, these two episodes clearly show the role that intelligence plays in British national security. MI6 (foreign intelligence), MI5 (domestic intelligence) and the GCHQ (signals intelligence) have to deliver intelligence on the basis of which the decision on what to do next is a no-brainer. They have to gather what is called 'actionable intelligence', that is, intelligence that clearly suggests a course of action. When the question is whether Iraq has weapons of mass destruction, British intelligence is supposed to show whether that is true or not. When there is a possibility that a small group of radicals are plotting a terrorist attack, British intelligence agencies are supposed to prove whether such a plot exists. Simply put, British intelligence is supposed to give simple 'yes' or 'no' answers.

This aversion to uncertainty and ambiguity is also clear from the fact that British cabinet members will ask for the raw intelligence material when they feel that the intelligence reports they receive are insufficiently unequivocal. Tony Blair's Chief of Staff Jonathan Powell once lambasted the reports of the Joint Intelligence Committee, the UK's intelligence fusion centre that advises the cabinet, for their "lowest-common-denominator-type reports", and said that they were "hedging their bets and failing to give a clear steer in any direction." This assessment prompted him to bypass the JIC and go directly to the intelligence agencies to see whether he could get a more straightforward view on the threats to British national security.[6]

From this perspective, the recently revealed mass data collection by the GCHQ should come as no surprise. In a way, the availability of massive amounts of digital data is a godsend for intelligence agencies that want to eliminate any doubt regarding the intentions of their foes. After all, access to e-mails, Facebook posts, Skype sessions and internet browsing histories means that the GCHQ has more information that can be assessed and more stones that can be turned to get the certainty they are expected to provide. It remains to be seen, however, whether this is the right way forward. The 'big data' approach is fraught with difficulties, and will be of little help in the British intelligence community's attempts to come up with the unequivocal assessments that they are expected to deliver.

Spying on Angry Birds

The documents leaked by Edward Snowden show that the GCHQ has built up an infrastructure that is capable of absorbing any kind of digital data imaginable, ranging from phone calls and Skype sessions to e-mail and browser histories. The organisation is even collecting the user data from people playing the online computer game Angry Birds, apparently in the hope that this will somehow enhance their insight into the dealings of the UK's secretive enemies.[7]

As anyone even remotely familiar with Facebook, Twitter and other forms of digital communication knows, people use these platforms primarily to talk about the holy trinity of homeliness: children, pets and food. The vast majority of the internet users are not involved in terrorism, espionage or WMD-proliferation, but everything they share, no matter how banal or innocuous, has to be collected and stored, at least temporarily, as it might contain pieces of an intelligence puzzle. This in itself is already quite a drain on the

---

[6] I. Johnston, "Intelligence Services Tried to Withhold Reports from Tony Blair after WMD Fiasco," *Independent*, May 25, 2014.

[7] J. Ball, "Angry Birds and 'Leaky' Phone Apps Targeted by NSA and GCHQ for User Data," *Guardian*, January 28, 2014.

GCHQ's resources, but then the operators have to wade through these mind-boggling amounts of data so see whether they contain any clues about activities that would harm British national interests.

It is true that there are ways to process bulk data, but whether these will contribute anything to the elimination of the uncertainty regarding terrorist or spy plots is highly unlikely. From what we know about the way terrorist plots in the UK have been discovered and dismantled, traditional law enforcement and intelligence tactics have been much more important than mass data processing and analysis. It is, of course, hard to tell exactly how intelligence agencies work, but several foiled plots have been covered quite extensively by respected British newspapers, and their reports suggest that the crucial intelligence was gathered through phone tapping and placing bugs in cars and apartments.[8] This suggests that if the jihadist terrorist threat was contained in the years after the London Bombings, it was because MI5 was doing what secret services have been doing for decades, not because the GCHQ was collecting user data from Angry Birds.

Moreover, collecting more information also means that much time will have to be spent processing information that only confirms what is already known. During the 2009 G20 summit in London, for instance, the GCHQ went to spectacularly great lengths to spy on foreign leaders and officials, even going through the trouble of setting up a fake internet café to intercept the e-mails of their unsuspecting guests.[9] The operation may have been impressive in its professionalism, but what Gordon Brown and his colleagues – the operation had gotten the go-ahead from the highest political levels – hoped to get out is it is anyone's guess. Any journalist or policy analyst can fill the GCHQ in about the positions that the various governments are going to take at G20 meetings, so spending precious time and resources on finding this out in such a devious and circuitous way borders on the pathological.

While 'big data' seems like a wealth of information, it is unclear in what way it contributes to the work of the British intelligence agencies. It is perfectly understandable that intelligence officials would see whether they could get something out of the stream of Facebook posts and Skype sessions, but the proof of the pudding is, as always, in the eating, and that is where the mass data collection appears to fall short.

The trouble with finding plots

A second reservation one should have about the British collection of mass data is that it is underpinned by a rather simplistic view on the intelligence agencies' targets. It rests on the assumption that plans that are harmful to British interests will become clearer when there is more information available. While intuitively appealing, this notion ignores the fact that intelligence is rarely conclusive, not only because it is often incomplete and unreliable, but also because it reflects a murky reality.

---

[8] See for example D. Casciani, "Liquid Bomb Plot: What Happened," *BBC News*, September 9, 2008; "Profile: Parviz Khan," *Guardian*, February 18, 2008; D. Gardham, "How the MI5 Watchers Trapped the Home-Grown Terrorists," *Telegraph*, February 1, 2012; J. Sutton, "Terror Plot Four Sentenced: Men behind Plan to Bomb TA Centre in Luton Are Jailed for More than 40 Years," *Luton on Sunday*, April 18, 2013; T. Whitehead, "Jihadists Planned to Attack Luton TA Base Using Remote Controlled Car Packed with Explosives," *Telegraph*, April 15, 2013; S. Laville and V. Dodd, "Birmingham Terror Gang Who Thought 7/7 Was Not Deadly Enough Found Guilty," *Guardian*, February 22, 2013.

[9] E. MacAskill et al., "GCHQ Intercepted Foreign Politicians' Communications at G20 Summits," *Guardian*, June 13, 2013.

The planning of a terrorist attack, for instance, is not a linear process. It does not start out with a plan that is executed step by step until the attack has been carried out. Instead, terrorists frequently switch to other targets, change their minds about the weapons they are going to use, and sometimes fail to follow through on their plans altogether. Also, various cell or group members may have different opinions about the way forward, which adds further to the ambiguity and fluidity of the situation. In such cases, intelligence, no matter how accurate and comprehensive, can hardly be used to adequately predict an organisation's or a cell's next move.

The same goes for intelligence on state actors. Political leaders hesitate, change their minds, improvise, act irrationally and whimsically, and respond to changes in the strategic environment. For example, Hitler believed he could draw Austria into the Third Reich without having to use the German armed forces, but he had a sudden change of heart when the Austrian Federal Chancellor announced a plebiscite on accession to Germany.[10] Similarly, the 1939 Soviet occupation of parts of Poland and the Baltics were prompted only by the Soviet-German non-aggression pact.[11] Stalin had no such ambitions before the pact was signed, which, like the *Anschluss* of Austria to Germany, shows that even major steps like the occupation of another country can be the result of a change of plans that was dictated by unforeseen events.

When decisions about attack plans, or even war and peace, are made at such short notice and in such an *ad hoc* way, it is unreasonable and even harmful to expect intelligence agencies to deliver unambiguous intelligence assessments about the intentions of their targets. This uncertainty is inherent to intelligence work, and cannot be eliminated by collecting more information. Intelligence is about what a target is going to do, and that is not something that can be read from an intelligence dossier. To overlook this basic point is gloss over the complexity and fluidity of the reality that intelligence agencies are examining. Instead, rather than trying to eliminate uncertainty by collecting ever more data on their targets, British policy makers should accept that they have to work with murky pictures. A failure to do so will force intelligence agencies to look for straightforward answers that are simply impossible to give.

Where it all goes wrong

But what if intelligence is missed? What if there is a crucial piece of information that would clear matters up and would save the UK from an attack? Against such risk-averseness, it must be pointed out that the drive towards collecting ever vaster amounts of information blatantly disregards the fact that intelligence failures are rarely the result of a lack of information. The 9/11 attacks and the 2009 Fort Hood Shooting, for instance, could have been prevented if the intelligence actors involved would have handled the available information better. The 9/11 Commission concluded that the failure to anticipate the 9/11 attacks had to do with flaws in the sharing of information rather than in the collection.[12] In the case of the Fort Hood Shooting, the FBI knew that the perpetrator had repeatedly stressed his commitment to jihad in e-mail

---

[10] I. Kershaw, *Hitler: 1936-1945, Nemesis* (London: Penguin, 2000), 73–75.

[11] G. Roberts, *Stalin' Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939-1953* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 33–34.

[12] *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 416–417.

correspondence with the radical preacher Anwar al-Awlaki, yet estimated that further examination was not necessary.[13]

The point can be stressed further by referring to the mother of all intelligence failures, the Soviet failure to adequately anticipate the German invasion in 1941. All the information, some of which supplied by British intelligence, was there, but Stalin simply refused to believe that Hitler would open a second front. As few in his inner circle had the nerve to stand up to the Soviet dictator, the intelligence assessments about the German war plans were never used.[14] In the same vein, in 1982 British military intelligence officials had concrete clues that Argentina was about to invade the Falkland Islands, but somehow their warnings failed to make their way Margaret Thatcher's cabinet, which as a result was caught completely off-guard by the Argentinian junta's bold move.[15] More recently, it turned out that MI5 knew that Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale, responsible for the murder of British Army soldier Lee Rigby, were supportive of jihadism but decided that the two did not pose a threat.[16]

This list could easily be expanded, but the main point is that improving the performance of intelligence agencies is not necessarily a matter of expanding their capabilities for information gathering. What matters is what goes on inside the intelligence agencies once the information is collected. Whatever the nature of the failures that occurred in the examples just mentioned, gathering more information would not have been the answer. This being the case, we have yet to find the problem to which the GCHQ's mass data collection is the solution.

Seeing the forest through the trees

The final major issue with the British mass data collection is that it diverts attention away from the bigger picture. Discovering plots is part of the job of intelligence agencies, but they must not get bogged down in this to the point where they fail to generate more strategic intelligence assessments. Intelligence agencies, after all, have a crucial role in informing policy makers about changes in the strategic environment.

That the neglect of this role comes at a price was illustrated by the intelligence failure regarding the 2002 Bali Bombings, perpetrated by the radical Islamist group Jemaah Islamiyah. Looking back on the attack, Dennis Richardson, then head of the Australian intelligence agency ASIO conceded: "The intelligence failure in Bali was the failure to identify the transition of Jemaah Islamiyah some time after 1996 into a terrorist organization. It was not on our radar screen as a terrorist organisation before December 2001."[17] The lesson to be learnt here is that there is more to the work of intelligence agencies than merely catching enemies in the act. Intelligence agencies also have to inform policy makers of important developments, such as the transformation of a radical movement into a terrorist organization.

---

[13] *Final Report of the William H. Webster Commission on The Federal Bureau of Investigation, Counterterrorism Intelligence, and the Events at Fort Hood, Texas, on November 5, 2009*, 2012, chap. 6 and 10.

[14] D.E. Murphy, *What Stalin Knew: The Enigma of Barbarossa* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 248–249.

[15] "Thatcher under Heavy Criticism for Allowing Falklands Invasion," *The Hour*, June 25, 1982; S. Jermy, *Strategy for Action: Using Force Wisely in the 21st Century* (London: Knightstone Publishing, 2011), 259.

[16] S. Laville and V. Dodd, "Could MI5 Have Stopped Lee Rigby's Murder?," *Guardian*, December 19, 2013,.

[17] J. Gordon and M. Forbes, "ASIO Chief Concedes Bali Failure," *The Age*, June 20, 2003.

Whether British intelligence is delivering in this respect, is questionable, as there is no way around the observation that they are collecting literally all digital communication in the world, yet were surprised by the Arab Spring, easily one of the most momentous and geo-strategically important events in the last decade, and one that had a clear impact on the development of Al Qaeda and affiliated groups. In fact, when the first uprisings occurred, MI6 and the GCHQ were cutting down their spending on intelligence gathering in the Arab world. In one of its annual reports, the Intelligence and Security Committee rightfully wondered whether the agencies "should have been able to anticipate how events might subsequently unfold, and whether the fact that they did not realise that the unrest would spread so rapidly across the Arab world demonstrates a lack of understanding about the region".[18] To its credit, MI5 quickly recognised that, contrary to what many believed, the Arab Spring would give Al Qaeda the chance to regain prominence, but the fact that the Arab Spring was missed, does not bode well.[19] Intelligence agencies that fail to understand the environments they are operating may succeed tactically, but are destined to fail strategically.

Bringing analysis back in

In his famous treatise *On war*, The German military strategist Carl von Clausewitz wrote: "Much of the intelligence that we receive in war is contradictory, even more of it is plain wrong, and most of it is fairly dubious. What one can require of an officer, under these circumstances, is a certain degree of discrimination, which can only be gained from knowledge of men and affairs and from good judgement."[20] Read as a warning that intelligence rarely speaks for itself, Von Clausewitz' assessment is a clear indictment of the drive towards mass data collection. Instead of enlarging the amount of information to increase the precision of the intelligence assessments and eliminate any uncertainty, British intelligence should use 'good judgement' and 'knowledge of man and affairs' to think through the meaning of the intelligence they collect.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that critical thinking and creative analysis can remedy three of the four pitfalls that have been discussed in the previous paragraphs. First, an adequate understanding of the threats can lead to more targeted data gathering and can thus help avoid wasting valuable resources on the processing of useless information. Second, in cases where the intelligence is equivocal or ambiguous, the way forward has to be decided on the basis of the intelligence in combination with knowledge about the actors involved. This is informed guesswork, but sometimes this is the best that intelligence officers and policy makers can do. Regarding the bigger picture, the failure of MI6 and the GCHQ to anticipate the Arab Spring shows that there is a need for people who watch the strategic context. Intelligence agencies should not only try discover plots, but also have to generate strategic intelligence to inform national security policy and to guide their own activities. For this, analyses of social and political trends and their possible impact on threats to the UK are indispensable. Without such analyses, British national security policy is doomed to fail.

---

[18] *Annual Report 2011-2012* (London: Intelligence and Security Committee, 2012).

[19] MI5 director Jonathan Evans was among the first to warn about the possibility that Al Qaeda would regain strength in the chaos that followed the Arab Spring. See S. O'Neill, "Arab Spring Is Allowing Al-Qaeda to Rebuild, MI5 Chief Warns," *The Times*, June 26, 2012.

[20] Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1980), 92.

The problem with mass data gathering is that it misses the point of what intelligence is and how it should be used. The world is complex, constantly in flux and characterised by deep uncertainty. Therefore, intelligence does not provide unequivocal answers, no matter how badly the British government would want it to do so. Instead, intelligence work inevitably involves guessing, interpreting, speculating, and assessing possible future developments. There is no amount of data in the world that is big enough to change this.

Teun van Dongen is a national and international security expert and a PhD-candidate at Leiden University. This article was originally published as 'Se James Bond no ha dubbi, Londra è in pericolo' in the Italian international affairs journal Limes.