

Diary of an internet intelligence investigation researcher

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Alice Hancock shares what it's like working in the digital investigations and intelligence team at Thames Valley Police

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I work as an internet intelligence investigation (III) researcher in the digital investigations & intelligence team for Thames Valley Police. My role centres around researching and providing relevant intelligence from online sources. This provides a crucial intelligence picture to the force around protest activity, community tensions and national incidents. Working alongside another dedicated researcher, an intelligence development officer (IDO) and a supervisor, we specialise in advanced online research. We support investigations across the force from missing person enquiries to major operations. It's a dynamic and varied job that keeps us on our toes.

Our wider team includes digital media investigators (DMIs), a digital trainer, a detective sergeant and a detective inspector. We all work together to offer support and direction to digital or online elements of any investigation.

Monday

I kick off the week by diving into emails and scanning police systems and online sources for any protest activity that might impact force resources. This includes high numbers of people in built-up areas, groups that have previously blocked roads or contentious causes. As part of the force's vital signs, I feed into the force daily management meeting, where we discuss matters of strategic threat and risk. My input ensures the force's management teams are aware of any upcoming events that may cause resourcing issues or community tensions.?

I identify a protest that could disrupt the public's daily lives due to the contentious cause and potential for high numbers of attendees on a busy high street. A planning meeting with internal partners, such as Operation Planning and Neighbourhood Policing, is organised which follows the

national decision model format. My assessment was crucial for our operations planning team to evaluate risks and allocate resources effectively.

Tuesday

This morning, I'm stepping in for a colleague on leave, handling national reporting requirements.

Just as I am about to take a lunch break, my supervisor alerts me to a potential non-violent direct-action protest against an organisation that evening. I quickly scan social media for discussions about the protest and produce an intelligence assessment on the group's previous activities and potential risks.

My findings show that their protests have always been peaceful and brief, reducing the need for our public order team to intervene. I continue to monitor online activity throughout the day to stay ahead of any changes.

Wednesday

After the excitement of yesterday, today seems more relaxed. We start with team training, sharing techniques and case studies from the past month. One IDO showcases a platform for identifying modern slavery and human trafficking offences, while a DMI shares their success in locating a missing person using a new social media platform. I share these insights with other intelligence teams and set up an account to explore the platform further. These sessions are invaluable for enhancing knowledge and understanding across the team and the wider force.

Tomorrow, I'll be attending the Silver Suite as the III support for the Intelligence Cell at the Global Artificial Intelligence Safety Summit in Milton Keynes. This high-profile event requires meticulous preparation and the whole team has been working on it for a considerable amount of time. I spend the afternoon reviewing the attendee list for any online threats or fixator activity that could impact the summit.

Thursday

It's an early start and a change of scenery as I head to the marquee where our Silver Suite is set up. Despite the freezing temperatures, I'm prepared with plenty of layers! My first task is to set up

the online monitoring schedules, ensuring I'm instantly alerted to any potential risks to the event. Overnight, intelligence revealed that an event worker had disclosed sensitive details online, breaching their contract. I swiftly capture the post and forward it to the event manager through the Silver Commander for immediate action.

Just before the attendees began arriving, a suspicious male is spotted filming a secured area. Officers stop him and, while my colleagues check his details on police systems, I delve into his online footprint. My research reveals he is a local resident concerned about road closures, posing no significant risk. This incident underscores the critical role of online support in operations like these, where missing online threats could have serious consequences.

The busiest times of the day are when attendees arrive and depart. After a quick lunch in the makeshift canteen, I return to the much warmer marquee to continue monitoring and researching online activity until we are stood down by the Silver Commander.

Friday

Specialising in advanced online research, I support officers in case (OICs) with their investigations, whether it's identifying suspects, creating digital profiles or pinpointing specific locations from limited imagery.

This morning, I am working on a low-priority request when a high-priority task comes in. With a two-day turnaround for high-priority requests, this work takes precedence. I am tasked with locating family members and potential victims of a suspect involved in distributing indecent images of children. Using multiple systems and tools, I compile a comprehensive digital profile of the suspect. This enables the OIC to contact family members and implement safeguarding measures for at-risk children.

Returning to the low-priority request, I need to identify the location of a property where two suspects were pictured. The image showed them in a garden with a red brick house and an outbuilding in the background. By examining small details and using various techniques, I determine there was a park in front of the house, it was south-facing and had a rear driveway. Using Google Maps, I successfully identify the property, leading to targeted patrols to disrupt potential criminal activity.

This role is one of the most dynamic and rewarding I've ever had. One day, I'm analysing community tensions data and the next, I'm supporting a Silver Command team in the midst of a fast-paced operation.

Every day brings a new challenge, but the common thread is the sense of purpose, knowing that my work directly contributes to keeping our communities safe.?

- This article was peer reviewed by Conor Walsh, Police Sergeant, MPS

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