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Questioning Who Packed Your Bags:

an open and shut case

by Philip Baum

The classic example of a passenger being duped into carrying an improvised explosive device onto an aircraft is the much publicised tale of Anne-Marie Murphy. In April 1986, Murphy checked in for her El Al flight from London to Tel Aviv believing that she was on the way to wed her boyfriend (and father of her unborn child), Nezar Hindawi. Unbeknownst to her, Hindawi had secreted a bomb in the false lining of the holdall that he had given her the day before. Fortunately for the passengers and crew, Murphy was identified as a possible threat to the flight and, as such, her bag underwent a dump search in which the device was identified. It is worthwhile noting that the bag in question had been X-rayed by Heathrow security and no cause for alarm had been identified. It is for this reason that the incident is often cited as an example of the benefits of profiling. However, it also heralded the widespread introduction of security questioning.

To whom do your bags belong? Who packed your bags? Where? When? Since you packed your bags, where have they been? What items have other people given you to carry? Such questions, originally part and parcel of the Israeli profiling system, fast became in vogue for other carriers around the globe. In the United States, the Federal Aviation Administration (at that time) mandated that such questions be asked of all

passengers on specific routes. The aim, of course, was to try and establish whether the security of a passenger's bag might have been compromised. Whilst we may trust the passenger in front of us and be utterly convinced that they would not knowingly be a threat to a flight, we have to decide whether they might have been used by a terrorist, either by agreeing to carry an item for somebody else or affording a stranger the opportunity to infiltrate a device into their bag. Could the passenger be a mule?

The questions were never intended to reveal a hijacker or saboteur. No self-respecting terrorist would go to all the trouble of secreting a device in their own bag, only to then tell a security agent that, "Yes, I have been given something by somebody else"! Sadly, many of the members of the general public that like to mock our aviation security system, and even a few ill-informed regulators, have yet to grasp that fact.

The questions were originally designed as "open" questions, in order to illicit an "information" answer rather than "closed" questions which can lead to a "yes" or "no", or simple nod or shake of the head. For example, the question would be, "Who packed your bags?", not "Did you pack your bags yourself?"; likewise "What have you been given to take on this flight?" was preferred to "Has anybody given you anything to carry on this flight?" Whilst the difference is subtle, it is actually critical if we are serious about using such questions

to unmask the duped passenger. There are two reasons for this. First of all, it forces the passenger being questioned to communicate and think about the question being posed. Secondly, the methodology ensures that the questioner, be it a security screener or airline check-in agent, listens to the answers rather than reeling off questions on auto-pilot.

In many respects it doesn't matter what the answer to the question is, rather the way in which the question is answered. The architects of the process recognised, for example, that there would be many a business traveller who would have left their baggage in their office, accessible by their secretary, yet who would answer "no" to having left their baggage unattended. The fact that the passenger might lie would not necessarily be a concern as it was more important to establish whether one was dealing with the type of passenger who would employ a secretary that could be a terrorist. The questioner was supposed to be assessing the passenger's intelligence and degree of naivety rather than the actual answers to the questions. One must remember that Anne-Marie Murphy was not "Brain of Ireland" and that the questions were designed to identify people of her ilk and in her league.

So all well and good. We created an intelligent system, based on open questions, to identify stupid people! And, if not stupid, then gullible at the very least. Yet, somehow, in the two decades that

have elapsed since Murphy's flight to nowhere, we have managed to extract the intelligent aspect of the system and turn it into yet another example of silly security that ranks high up there with bans on metal knives from meal trays in-flight (whilst allowing metal forks), confiscating bottles of water at security checkpoints and, my favourite, searching every vehicle that accesses airside areas of an airport in exactly the same way (you know, under-vehicle inspections by mirror whilst the seats are never touched).

The questions are often posed by a check-in agent who is more concerned about tagging the bag to the right destination, inputting passenger data and assigning seats. Rarely is eye contact established and 99% of the time the questions have been converted into "closed" questions. In fact, worse than closed questions...statements that give the answer the agent wants to hear! "You packed your bag yourself?" "Nobody gave you anything to take on board?" And, on the rare occasion that the agent might glance in the passenger's direction, the glance is often accompanied with a nod or shake of the head by the questioner, willing the passenger to answer in the appropriate manner.

Meanwhile, many airlines have opted to write down the questions and post them on top of the check-in counter. The agent then points to the questions and asks the passenger to state if the answer is "no" to any of the "closed" questions that all require the answer "yes". This doesn't help us evaluate the passenger. It just provides the agent with the ability to confirm, on their computer, that there are no baggage security dilemmas to be resolved.

And, to make matters worse, in our attempts to automate the entire check-in process, self-service kiosks are now

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asking us the same questions. By definition, the kiosks can only deal with "yes" or "no" answers. In some respect they are a mild improvement on the questions written on top of the check-in counter inasmuch as they vary the required answer. The first question may be, "Did you pack your bag yourself?", where the required answer is "yes", whilst the next question might be, "Has anybody given you anything to take on board?", where the required answer is "no". However, the fact remains that no self-service check-in kiosk has the ability to assess the vulnerability of the passenger answering the questions.

I like to use the example of the tourist who is returning home on an evening flight. Even if we use a "closed" question and ask whether the passenger has left their baggage unattended, if the answer is "no", one must follow-up with a question as to where their baggage has been throughout the day. The questioner, taking note (which a computer can't) of the size and type of baggage the passenger is carrying, needs to consider whether it is reasonable for a tourist to have checked out of a hotel in the morning, as is often required, yet still

managed to be with their bag throughout the day. The passenger may well have left their baggage with the hotel porter and, in their eyes, perceive this to be in a secure environment. I would argue otherwise - leaving a bag with a porter, often telling him not only the intended collection time but also the specific flight one is taking, when the item is unlikely to be re-opened, is a significant security concern, especially in airport hotels.

Automating the passenger facilitation process does enhance security by reducing the queues inside airport terminals and ideally enabling us to board contented passengers onto our flights. However, by automating the booking, check-in and even document verification process, whilst we may have achieved the goal of expediting passengers from home to their seat on board, we have also denied ourselves the opportunity of having that face-to-face contact that is an essential element in the security process. And it's not only about baggage security; it's also about identifying intoxicated or other potentially disruptive passengers.

Questioning is a skill. It requires eye contact. It demands expression. If we're going to delegate the process to a machine or postcard then we are simply kidding ourselves whilst creating another unnecessary hurdle for our customers to overcome. If we're going to question, then let's do it properly. Bizarrely it doesn't take any longer to ask an "open" question than a "closed" one - "Who packed your bags?" is actually quicker than "Did you pack your bags yourself?" Eye contact doesn't take time either. It all boils down to training and a will to have an effective tool in our avsec armoury rather than yet another tick-box exercise.


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