

'Spooks' and the Politics of Intelligence

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EMILY CLEWS, MAY 11 2013

A Critical Evaluation of *Spooks* Series Six for What It Tells Us about Intelligence Tradecraft and the Politics of Intelligence

Philip Knightley argues that there exists an 'inability to distinguish between the fiction and reality of the intelligence world' which 'is ironically appropriate, because that was how it all began – in fantasy'.^[1] Although this may be the case, popular culture is also a vehicle for (re)presenting fundamental ideas about how the world works, and can be explored 'for insights into the character and functioning of world politics'.^[2] The intertextuality that occurs between official discourses and popular culture, leads to a blurring between the boundaries of fact and fiction and the emergence of a 'virtual reality'. This appears natural to the public, and is reflected back to the policy making sphere.^[3] Thus the study of popular culture can be used to discern 'real world politics': the way in which society is conditioned into certain political and philosophical positions.^[4]

There are two problems with the blurred public perception of intelligence: firstly, 'whether such a blend of fact and fantasy, delivered by the media to the public with such regularity, leaves the latter as well informed as it should be, in the public interest',^[5] and secondly to realise that the work of the intelligence agencies is not value neutral and is every bit as political as the terrorists and dissidents they seek to contain and defeat.^[6] As a result it is important to educate the public about the realistic possibilities of what intelligence can and cannot deliver, as well as the combination of factors that lead to intelligence failures.^[7]

Through a critical analysis of *Spooks* (series six), I intend to contrast those aspects that mirror the 'real world' and intelligence reality, and distinguish these from those included for entertainment purposes only. This analysis is conducted through three themes: context and threats, actors and their politics, and intelligence tradecraft.

Introduction to *Spooks*

Developed before 9/11, *Spooks* was first broadcast in May 2002, seven months after the 9/11 attacks, and is regarded as a successful espionage drama for British television.^[8] Resembling American intelligence shows such as *24* (2001-2010) and *Alias* (2001-2006), series six was first aired in 2007.^[9] It differed from previous series in the use of a single storyline throughout all the episodes and focussed more on the interaction between intelligence agencies and diplomacy.^[10] To maintain its virtual reality, the show is noted for last minute script changes making it overwhelmingly plot and event driven at the expense of character development.^[11]

Context and Threats

The producers of *Spooks* are 'docu-dramatists' creating virtual reality by raising serious themes relevant in the real world today.^[12] The overarching theme of the series is the acquisition of nuclear weapons capabilities, in this case Iran's, the global instability caused and diplomatic incidents, and methods used to try to contain this new threat.^[13] In the current global context, Iran continues to cause discomfort for its attempts to procure a nuclear stockpile and its anti-western ideology. As its capabilities increase it is likely in time that it will become a key proliferator of chemical and biological weapons and missiles.^[14] Iran is expected to gain a nuclear weapon during the next decade although this progress is dependent upon 'intangibles' such as logistics, training and maintenance.^[15]

'Spooks' and the Politics of Intelligence

Written by Emily Clews

Other threats the fictional Section D (Counter Terrorism Unit) include the use of chemical and biological weapons,[16] state sponsored politically motivated and home grown terrorism,[17] and international criminal organisations.[18]

These threats are presented as new, exceptional, immediate and foreign – all emanating from 'recognisable others' (Iranians, Algerians, Al-Qaeda, criminal groups).[19] The intensity of the threats and the urgency with which they need to be diffused, commonly referred to as the 'ticking time bomb' scenario, render extraordinary and illegal measures justified by limiting character and audience questioning over whether the threat really exists.[20] In practice this paradigm provides an explanation for the changing attitudes and norms towards controversial practices such as torture.

The multiplicity of threats from disparate actors, as well as the regularity of attack, mirrors the 'environment of fear' present in contemporary society. The negative consequences of globalisation[21] have resulted in asymmetric threats from terrorist and international criminal organisations, who use limited resources and technology to launch high impact attacks in areas of vulnerability. As a result 'intelligence and how it is used is presented as our first line of defence against terrorists and hostile states'.[22] Therefore the threats presented in the programmes are seemingly real and plausible, anchoring as a portrayal of 'true' reality in the viewer's imagination. Although the threats appear real, the consistency, diversity and pace with which they occur is added to facilitate the creation of a 'ticking time bomb' scenario to create a sense of suspense and excitement.

Actors and Their Politics

The workings of intelligence agencies are based in politics, where they provide value free intelligence estimates to inform policy-making decisions within the government. In popular media, intelligence agencies are seen to convey political messages that influence the way in which the audience views society. Characters within *Spooks* are therefore not supposed to be representing 'truth', but rather broader political opinions that reflect contemporary issues in society.

The series explores the changing dynamics of four main agencies, the Counter Terrorism Unit (Section D) at MI5 (Britain), The CIA (America), the Iranian Special Consult (Iran), and an international criminal organisation, the Yalta Group. Located in the work of MI5, analysis is limited to the protagonist of each agency as an embodiment of its values – principally through Harry Pierce, Bob Hogan, Dariush Bakhshi. The Yalta Group is analysed wholly in terms of its actions and philosophy.

Described as the 'friendly face of Machiavelli',[23] Harry Pierce is the bedrock of his team and the series. He is a political realist with a conscience, acting pessimistically in decision making which secretly troubles him emotionally. He possesses strong moral values which constantly keep him and his team on the side of 'morally right' even though they often transcend the law and his mandate. Undoubtedly loyal and patriotic, Harry often accepts the immoral actions of others (namely policy makers) as he usually realises their aims represent Britain's best interest and the 'greater good'. He is experienced and plays the 'great game' well, never overemphasising Britain's global position, but maintaining importance through negotiation, deal brokering, and the occasional justified threat. Within the team he is the pinnacle of authority, reliability and trust.

Harry's greatest threat comes from his equal in the CIA's London branch, Director Bob Hogan. Following a unilateral political philosophy, he ruthlessly pursues the advancement of America's self-interest. His effective use of Denial and Deception (C3D2) techniques serves to manipulate Section D's collection and analysis of information,[24] resulting in Harry's decision to blow up a civilian train in order to uncover Iranian development and proliferation of chemical and biological weapons.[25] Evidence of Bob's denial continues to be revealed through the series, through withholding information from MI5 and a lack of intelligence sharing between the two organisations, which jeopardises a number of Section D operations.[26] US-UK relations are defined by him as 'There is no special relationship, when your useful your useful, when you're not you're in the way',[27] viewing Harry and his team as insignificant, indecisive and a liability to his own operations. Most critically, Bob Hogan's character constantly commits immoral acts to achieve his goals. He kills, for example, Yalta Group members (including an attempt at one of Harry's team) after he finds out

'Spooks' and the Politics of Intelligence

Written by Emily Clews

about their existence.[28] On one occasion Bob is also motivated by greed, setting up Adam Carter for payment to be tortured by a criminal organisation known as the Redbacks.[29] The end result is a contradictory portrayal of United States actions and interests in the programme. The United States appears to be the ultimate enemy, carrying out more criminal and deceptive actions than other actors in the programme. However it cannot be classified as such because Section D (the moral torchbearers) continues to work bilaterally with the Americans and towards their interests.[30] The conclusion, that there is no such thing as a friendly intelligence agency, deduces that it is better to work with the Americans than against them, as in many cases the effectiveness of 'our' intelligence depends on their cooperation.

The role of Iran is presented through its Special Consult, Dariush Bakhshi. Although in many ways a deceptive character,[31] his intentions and actions do not classify him as the ultimate evil. Instead the image represented is of an individual who aspires to be trusted and respected, with his country's acquisition of WMD's portrayed as bringing Iran up to par with the United States and Britain.[32] This represents his ambition to overcome a 'Clash of Civilisations' mind-set displayed by Britain and America.[33] Finally Bakhshi has moral credibility, informing Harry of a planned Al-Qaeda attack on a British school after he discovers that his wife was working for MI5. The view portrayed of Iran through the series is one of a misunderstood threat, made by Western actors who are not prepared to change their mind-set.

The Yalta Group, whilst technically a criminal organisation, represents the problems of infiltration into the intelligence services, boasting agents embedded in the highest levels of European, Russian and Chinese intelligence services. Their end goal, described as 'institutionalism gone mad', is to cap America's power before its actions result in a third world war – one possibly fought with nuclear weapons. They aim to achieve this through balancing the powers in the global system, enabling Iran's nuclear accession while attempting to disconnect American satellite communications to thwart their military power and thus prevent war. 'This way no one dies' is the morally desirable message which recruits Ros successfully to their cause, angered as she is at American actions.[34] Similar to the representation of Iran, the distinction of the Yalta Group between good and evil is ultimately blurred. To achieve their end goal of greater global stability, heightened short-term instability must be created to work, like MI5, towards the 'greater good'. However unlike Harry who has to sacrifice his best interest to corrupt politicians to bring about the 'greater good', the enforcement of global instability is a step too far, which his team have to stop.

Therefore, the political representations of the agencies/actors can be summarised as follows: MI5 only make mistakes when ordered too by a higher authority, that some members of the CIA are morally corrupt, US interests can be more threatening to British interests than developing countries or criminal organisations, and that the only actors portrayed as definably evil are those who organise and launch sporadic terrorist attacks – the distinction between friend and enemy being made clearer by being tied culturally and geographically to these groups. The series is Brit-centric within the international arena as it underplays UK-US relations in order to send a political message.[35] It envisages that Britain should work harder in its multi-national diplomatic relationships, even though change to the international order ultimately comes slowly.

Tradecraft: How Intelligence Work Is Portrayed in The Programme, How Accurate It Is and What Has Been Omitted

Common misunderstandings about the nature of intelligence tradecraft circulate as a result of its representation in popular culture, combined with the fact that only a privileged few have a reality with which to compare it. At the expense of entertainment, however, there are a number of themes that are exacerbated, made insignificant or not included at all in this series. *Spooks'* use of a believable context and realistic threats to create a 'virtual reality', leads audiences to assume that what they see on screen in relation to tradecraft is also true. This assumption is seconded by the fact that the programme represents an alternative fictional representation of espionage, one that differs from James Bond for example.

The greatest diversions from the reality of tradecraft in this series are evident in the issues of intelligence sharing and spying on friends. The asymmetric threats faced globally since the 9/11 terrorist attacks has created a stronger emphasis than ever before on successful intelligence sharing within other agencies in the community, as well as

'Spooks' and the Politics of Intelligence

Written by Emily Clews

bilaterally and multilaterally between countries.[36] However this series shows no evidence of intelligence sharing within the British Intelligence community,[37] and very little is shared with the CIA. In reality the close US-UK intelligence liaison is often regarded as the basis of the 'special relationship', helping to sustain wider overall US-UK relations.[38] This is frequently echoed in the context of UK documents, and in American rhetoric,[39] the CIA Director of Operations admitting that 'virtually every capture or killing of a suspected terrorist outside Iraq since the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks – more than 3,000 in all – was a result of foreign intelligence services work alongside the agency'.[40] Therefore in the real world, it can be concluded that neither the UK nor the US wants anything or anyone to damage the valuable intelligence partnership.

Conversely, the issue of friends 'spying on friends' was overemphasised in this series of *Spooks*.^[41] In the global intelligence community, although this option may be a desirable one, spying on friends is generally not done in order to maintain more valuable channels of intelligence sharing.^[42] The United States has formal agreements with its European allies to this extent.^[43] With regards to counterintelligence there is a conflicting view as agencies look to recruit from opposing (and allied) agencies in an attempt to insulate themselves from traitors in their own ranks, which 'speaks to the principle in the world of espionage that there are no friendly intelligence services, only those you have not yet penetrated'.^[44] Based on cost-benefit analysis, in reality spying on friends is very rarely done, a more accurate portrayal would be of an agency's need to infiltrate another on a counterintelligence basis.

The show over-emphasises its human dimension. Issues such as trust and betrayal are important on both the personal/individual and operational/tactical levels of intelligence.^[45] The problems with the budding relationship of Adam Carter with co-worker Ros Myers demonstrates that the clandestine nature of the job is unlikely to allow a flourishing personal life outside of it, but are more readily included in the series to make it compelling television.

A recurring theme through the series, and popular culture representations of intelligence tradecraft more generally, is the predominance and uses of technology. It is recognised that intelligence derived from images (IMINT) and signals (SIGINT) can offer an analyst an increased sense of reliability compared to that derived from human sources (HUMINT).^[46] It would be a mistake to presume, however, that the technology is as reliable as the intelligence it produces. For example satellites need to be positioned in the right place at the right time, the images and signals flawless – assuming that the targets of interest can be open to see or hear.^[47] Hiding weaponry in underground labs, and the fact that members of terrorist cells rarely congregate or communicate through electrical devices highlights these problems. As a result there has been a renewed interest in the expansion of HUMINT, a similarity that has been noted between fictional and real world intelligence that 'both are trying to get back to basics. Rather than rely on high-tech wizardry, there is now a greater emphasis on spycraft of old'.^[48] Although *Spooks* does represent the ways in which technology can facilitate intelligence collection, it does not equally demonstrate the flaws in this method. To represent reality more faithfully, showing technology and its potential downsides, would reflect the debate currently raging between the use of SIGINT and HUMINT in the intelligence community.^[49]

However, the greatest shortfall in *Spooks* is that it does not represent fundamental intelligence processes, the most obvious being the exclusion of raw intelligence analysis for tactical (short term) purposes or strategic (long term) objectives.^[50] The series further does not show the dissemination of intelligence and its use to estimate, assess or forewarn possible futures threats.^[51] The use of open source intelligence, which makes up approximately 90% of the intelligence collection in peacetime, is equally ignored in *Spooks*.^[52] It is the dissemination part of the intelligence cycle that is considered to be the agency's 'Achilles heel', as during this process common cognitive, personal and organisational biases can affect the output – jeopardising the 'objectivity' and 'value' of the product.^[53] It is at this point that the sub-conscious impact of biases, many of which are developed through public media, can affect estimates made by analysts and decisions made by policy makers alike - 'when actors imitate spies who are themselves inspired by actors playing fictional spies, or when writers create agencies based on actual agencies ...the "commingling" of illusion and reality calls both into question'.^[54]

This *Spooks* series fails to distinguish between the production of intelligence information (classic espionage) and operations mounted to produce physical results (covert action). In reality, as a component, covert action is not a routine mission for intelligence agencies as is generally only effective if coordinated with the work of other policy implementing agencies as part of a broader low-cost low-risk strategy.^[55] The overemphasis on covert and

'Spooks' and the Politics of Intelligence

Written by Emily Clews

individual action undermines MI5's role within other intelligence sharing agencies in the British Intelligence community. For example, crucial links between MI5 and the Joint Terrorism and Analysis Centre (JTAC)[56] (Located in Thames House), as well as regionalisation of the Service and joint counterterrorism operations with the police,[57] are all channels, forums and bodies in which MI5 equally receive, analyse and act upon intelligence which facilitates the Service's effectiveness.[58]

Finally, and perhaps most alarmingly, none of the actors in *Spooks* are made accountable for their actions. Although Harry often takes responsibility for the decisions made by his team, these are hollow words because he is never punished. Consistent with the 'ticking time bomb' scenario, decisions and actions carried out within the show appear 'morally justified', even though in many cases they transcend the law. This is a point former head of MI5 Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller takes personally, disclosing in a rare radio interview that 'MI5 is not like *Spooks*. In *Spooks* everything is solved by half a dozen people who break the law to achieve results... I think given that we actually work strictly within the law, it is potentially quite damaging for the suggestion to prevail that we are totally above the law'.[59]

Parliamentary oversight and democratic accountability of the British Intelligence Community in the UK are both relatively recent developments that are absent from the show.[60]

Conclusion – The Impact of Fantasy

The in-depth analysis of *Spooks* series 6 was intended to better clarify the boundaries between fact and fiction in relation to the intelligence service which popular media blurs. Although the programme has a firm and believable basis in reality, omissions occur in relation to the political representations of the actors. It is too Brit-centric although the moral questions are real and there are blatant misrepresentation in regards to intelligence tradecraft. A significant point is that purposefully exaggerated misconceptions of intelligence, included in the name of entertainment, have, since *Spooks* was first aired a decade ago, caused a surge in recruiting interest to the Security Service. However, the violence portrayed in the series has served to attract some undesirable men and fewer women to the Service.[61]

In conclusion 'the Armani suits, luxurious offices, flashy cars and above all, the high levels of violence, bear no resemblance to a Service which prides itself as not being noticeable as it goes about its business'.[62] Although the development of a realistic portrayal of intelligence (especially tradecraft) is desirable, the intention is not to emphasise the 'entertainment and exhilaration' aspects of the industry, but rather to increase public knowledge of the intelligence community so they themselves can effectively distinguish the 'fact and fiction' as opposed to believing all that they see on the screen.

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'Spooks' and the Politics of Intelligence

Written by Emily Clews

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'Spooks' and the Politics of Intelligence

Written by Emily Clews

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'Spooks' and the Politics of Intelligence

Written by Emily Clews

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'Spooks' and the Politics of Intelligence

Written by Emily Clews

[28] Episode 8

[29] The fictional Redbacks are an organisation, similar to intelligence agencies, that torture intelligence officers in order to supply information to a 'customer' and by virtue of these actions are thus presented as ultimately bad. The running of the group by an unnamed American, and Jo's rhetoric in captivity blaming herself and other Western democracies for condoning the practices of torture and extraordinary rendition, the inclusion of this group into the storyline can be viewed as a very real political stance about judicially sanctioned American actions of detainee's in the War on Terror.

[30] For example in Episode 6.8 where Section D successfully restore US satellites, even though they were planning to use such satellites to launch an air strike on Iran.

[31] Lying about Iranian nuclear capability (Episode 5), as well as attempting to eliminate Section D in acceptance of a British peace treaty (Episode 9)

[32] In negotiations conducted in Episode 7, in exchange for the Iranian nuclear capability to remain secret, Bakshi requests that Iran become the sixth permanent member of the UN Security Council

[33] Other evidence of the 'Clash of Civilisations' mindset is the constant accusation of MI5 that Iran was behind their security breaches. First accused of being behind 'Copenhagen' in the train bombing in Episodes 1 and 2, and also of sponsoring Algerian extremist Abdul Kahrami in Episode 4. Bakhshi is actually usually the victim and target in such cases, for example he is the target for Kahrami's attack in Episode 4, and he gets shot by a British BNP group during a television interview in Episode 7.

[34] Episode 3

[35] More specifically this view disagrees with the US treatment of detainees in the War on Terror

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'Spooks' and the Politics of Intelligence

Written by Emily Clews

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'Spooks' and the Politics of Intelligence

Written by Emily Clews

[54] Svendsen, A.D.M (2009) '*Painting rather than photography: exploring spy fiction as a legitimate source concerning UK-US intelligence co-operation*', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, vol 7(1), pg 368

[55] Daugherty, W.J. Chapter 21 – 'The Role of Covert Action' in Johnson, L.K. eds (2009) *Handbook of Intelligence Studies*, Oxton, Routledge pg 279

[56] Aims to assess and analyse all intelligence relating to international terrorism. Comprised of representatives from sixteen government departments and agencies, JTAC is responsible for setting threat levels and issuing warnings, and thus works especially closely with MI5's Counter Terrorism Branch – the real life Section D

[57] In this partnership, MI5 take the lead in collecting, exploiting and assessing intelligence, while the police take the responsibility for the gathering of evidence, obtaining arrests, and preventing crime, with to date considerable success being achieved in Operation CERVIC and RHYME in particular.

[58] Andrew, C. (2010) *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5*, London, Penguin Books pg 817

[59] Brooks, R. '*BBC's lawless, gung-ho Spooks are security risk, says ex-MI5 chief*' originally published in the Guardian, Downloaded from http://www.lexisnexis.com/uk/nexis/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risr=21_T13596234694&format=GNBFI7sort=BOOLEAN&startDocNo=1&resultsUriKey=29_T1359234698&cisb=22_T13596234697&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=332233&docNo=1 23/12/11 13:45

[60] This consists of the Intelligence Security Committee (Intelligence Services Act 1994) to examine the policy, administration and expenditure of the agencies that constitute the British Intelligence Community.

[61] Wilkinson, N. (2009) '*Spookmania and the Media*', *British Journalism Review*, vol 20(1), pg 50

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