

# RESEARCH SHORT

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IMAGE FROM SHUTTERSTOCK

## Flipping the Script: How Can the IC Recast Its Story?

Debora Pfaff, Ph.D.

Most Americans experience the Intelligence Community through works of fiction—stories told on the silver screen, in powerful prose, and through conspiratorial overtures. These stories influence their thoughts about the mysterious entity that provides a critical national security function but is rarely seen or heard. Thoughts become beliefs, and beliefs form biases, making it incredibly difficult to convince the average person that the NSA doesn't listen to their phone calls and that CIA doesn't have a dossier on every American. Even as the IC persists in its national security mission, each generation of Americans trusts it less and less. Fictional information spreads like wildfire. How can the IC use the science of communication to ignite the truth?

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## Stories Are Compelling Tools That Shape Our Understanding— or Misunderstanding

Stories are the very fabric of the human experience. They have built cities, destroyed empires, established religions, and upended allegiances. They are Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s defiance of the Russian invasion, the success of the #MeToo movement, and the impetus for the American Revolution. Stories are why countries go to war and people fall in love. Everyone from major corporations to Internet influencers seems to be tapping into storytelling to find the link between empathy and action, using intrinsically held values to invoke powerful responses and drive change.<sup>1</sup>

Everyone except the Intelligence Community (IC), which has yet to break free of its smothering long-term relationship with secrecy. When it does—and it must, as argued in last year’s *Research Short*, “From a Whisper to a Shout: The IC Should Use Its Outside Voice”<sup>2</sup>—it faces an uphill battle to change the public’s perception of its maneuverings. The American public’s most compelling points of reference are Jason Bourne, QAnon,<sup>3</sup> and cable news hosts.<sup>4</sup> This is a problem, one the IC has brushed off for too long.

The false narratives that surround the IC are established and persuasive. Americans believe conspiracy theories, Hollywood, and the media because 150,000 years of storytelling dominance have hardwired the human brain to think in terms of stories.<sup>5</sup> The IC, on the other hand, is hardwired to deliver as little information as possible—concisely, dispassionately, and very, very selectively. The IC has little chance of eradicating the fictional narratives that saturate our society, but perhaps it can adopt the storytelling methods that support them.

Storytelling has an appreciable effect on our subconscious.<sup>6</sup> We lose ourselves in evocative narratives, adopting the thoughts and beliefs of characters with whom we identify. This can change our behaviors long after we close the pages or power off the screen.<sup>7</sup> As we age into adulthood, we stop believing in dragons and outgrow our dreams of being Wonder Woman, but we are primed to believe other stories, told to us with a similar absence of factual content. Beliefs, once established, tend to persist even in the face of empirical evidence to the contrary.<sup>8</sup> By the time someone believes an intelligence analyst’s average day involves waterboarding terrorists aboard a nuclear submarine stationed somewhere off the coast of Malaysia, it is already too late.

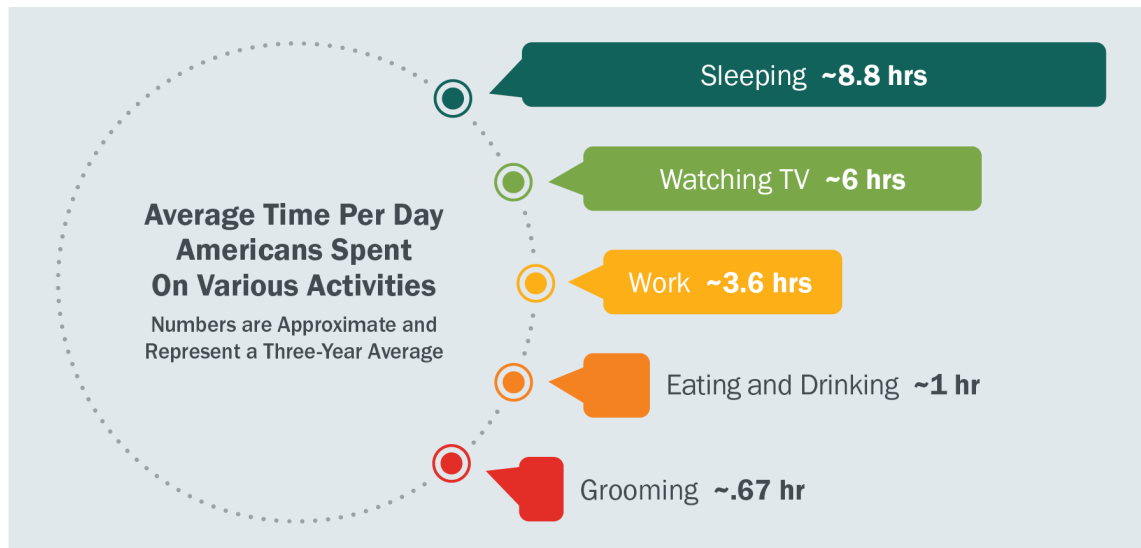
Plenty of data reinforce this highly exaggerated scenario. The U.S. media and entertainment industry is the largest in the world, pulling in about \$717 billion in 2019, with predictions for industry growth to \$825 billion in 2023. Filmed entertainment (motion pictures, television, and videos) was responsible for a little under \$200 billion of the 2019 industry earnings.<sup>9</sup> People tune in to escape the mundane, to indulge the whimsical, to relish the fantastical. And we do it a lot. In 2021, Americans streamed more than 15 million years’ worth of content—at times exceeding the amount of time spent streaming at the height of the COVID lockdowns in 2020.<sup>10</sup>

**Stories have to be told or  
they die, and when they die,  
we can't remember who we  
are or why we're here.**

—Sue Monk Kidd  
*The Secret Life of Bees*

That year, the average American spent more than 30 hours a week watching television, with an additional 12 hours spent on a television-connected device.<sup>11</sup> That is more time spent than on any other activity, except for sleeping. And it exceeds time spent in all other leisure, social, and sports activities combined.<sup>12</sup> Lest one blame the pandemic, this is hardly a departure from previous years.<sup>13</sup>

Figure 1.



Source: Figure 1 represents the author's average of data collected by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2019, 2020, and 2021: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Economic News Release: Table 1. Time Spent in Primary Activities and Percent of the Population Engaging in Each Activity, Averages for May to December 2019 and 2020," July 22, 2021 (last modified), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/atus.t01.htm>, and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Economic News Release: Table 1. Time Spent in Primary Activities and Percent of the Population Engaging in Each Activity, Average per Day by Sex, 2021 Annual Averages," June 23, 2022 (last modified), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/atus.t01.htm>.

## If You Think All This Programming Is Just Entertainment, Think Again

Viewers may not be consciously aware of the effect television has on their beliefs and subsequent actions. A study by Max Weisbuch from Tufts University tested whether white participants identified racial biases in performers from several popular television shows, including *CSI*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *House*. His experiment found participants detected negative body language and nonverbal cues toward Black performers much more often than their white counterparts. Perhaps more meaningfully, the bias the participants saw on screen increased their *own* biases after viewing the clips, as measured by an implicit associated biases test.<sup>14, 15</sup>

Weisbuch's study is not alone in these findings on the effect of television on beliefs. The Medical University of Vienna's Center for Public Health in Austria found that about 12 percent of Austrians believed the death penalty still existed in their country, despite the fact that Austria abolished it in 1968. The more American television the respondents viewed, the more likely they were to think their own country still imposed the death penalty.<sup>16</sup>

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Findings like these have led researchers to conclude that there is a correlation between fake television content and real human behavior. Their premise is that the people who spend more of their time watching television tend to perceive the world around them similarly to what they see on TV.<sup>17</sup> Humans are the only species that experience stimuli beyond their immediate surrounding environment; other animals perceive just what is right in front of them.<sup>18</sup> As we watch TV, hear stories, or read books, we develop “awareness or familiarity gained by experience of a fact or situation”—a standard definition of knowledge. Knowledge eases our inherent fear of the unknown; we find ourselves in a comfortable place, and we are increasingly reluctant to accept views that clash with those beliefs.

## When Searching for Reassurance, Reality Is Irrelevant

It is not just the entertainment industry that contributes to this quest to feel secure. Humans struggle deeply with the unknown, with uncertainty. Uncertainty unsettles us, driving us to look for any patterns of evidence that provide explanation and predictability, even if those patterns do not really exist. Perhaps this phenomenon explains why more than 50 percent of Americans believe in one or more conspiracy theories.<sup>19</sup>

A conspiracy theory involves the supposition that an important event or situation was controlled by a nefarious group of powerful or manipulative actors, who managed to cover up their role.<sup>20</sup> There is no evidence to support the theory, and it is not falsifiable—any attempt to disprove it is often regarded as further cover-up.<sup>21</sup> Human belief in conspiracy theories rests on a solid foundation of primitive instincts, psychological need, and imagination run amok.<sup>22</sup>

Our relationship with conspiracy theories sprang from our primitive survival instincts. If you thought a saber-toothed tiger was out to get you, you were paranoid. Unless of course there really *was* a saber-toothed tiger out to get you, in which case you avoided being eaten. The most paranoid, skeptical, and risk-averse people survived, leading to our genetically programmed existential need to feel safe and secure.

**Seeing is believing, believing is knowing, and knowing beats unknowing and the unknown.**

—Philip Roth  
*Zuckerman Unbound*

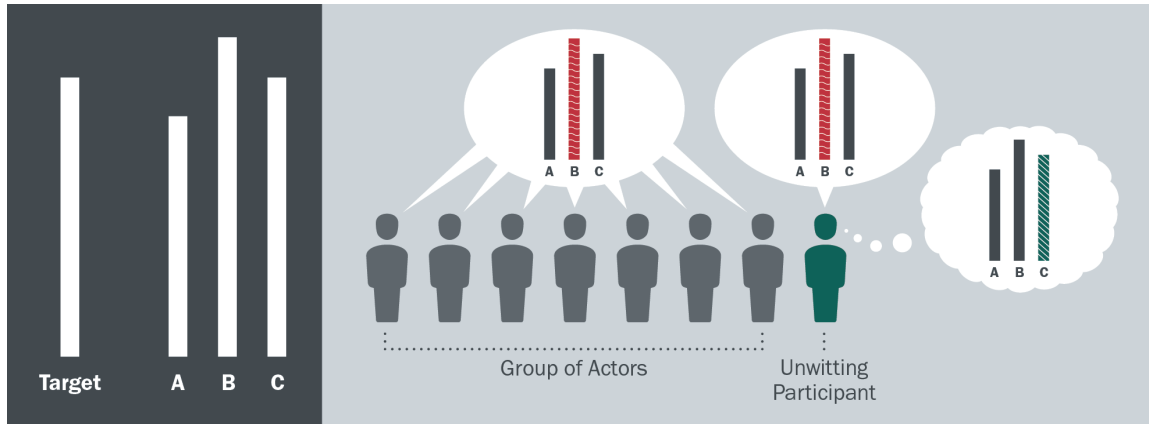
Beyond our genetic predispositions, psychology further suggests that we have an epistemic need for knowledge and certainty. We want to be able to explain why things happen, satisfy our curiosity, reduce our uncertainties, find meaning in experiences, defend our core beliefs, and ultimately—mitigate risk.<sup>23</sup>, <sup>24</sup> Conspiracy theories reassure people by supplying explanations that are consistent with an individual’s core beliefs; even when challenged, conspiracy theories hold up against uncertainty and contradiction.<sup>25</sup> They reduce feelings of powerlessness, randomness, and lack of control.

There is also a social “in-crowd” motive for believing in airplane chem trails or Avril Lavigne’s doppelganger. Humans have a need to belong to a group, to feel safety in numbers. This was perhaps best demonstrated in U.S. psychologist Solomon Asch’s classical conformity

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experiment, where 75 percent of the participants conformed to the wrong answer, even when the right one was obvious.<sup>26</sup>

**Figure 2. Asch’s Classical Conformity Experiment:** A group of eight college students were asked to select which of three lines of obviously differing lengths matched a target line. Unknown to the student who answered last, the other seven had previously agreed on a right or wrong answer that they all would provide. In 12 critical trials, 75 percent of the unsuspecting participants conformed to the group’s selection at least once.



**Source:** Figure derived from experiment's description in: Solomon E. Ache, "Studies of Independence and Conformity: I. A Minority of One Against a Unanimous Majority," *Psychological Monographs* 70, no. 9 (1956): 1-70, <https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fh0093718>.

A poll conducted by the Scripps Survey Research Center at Ohio University in 2006 found that 36 percent of Americans believed that it was “likely” or “somewhat likely” that U.S. Government officials actually carried out the 9/11 attacks, or at least knew they would occur and did nothing to stop them. More recently, theories surrounding the cause of COVID-19 posit everything from 5G to genetically modified organisms. And 39 percent of Americans believe there is a deep state—a parallel system of government comprising political elites in agencies including the FBI and CIA, that conspired against former President Donald Trump.

## If History Is Written by the Victor, the IC’s Future Belongs to the Best Storyteller

Narrative storytelling actively coalesces an audience around a specific conclusion, one that the storyteller introduces for consideration. Government communications often present information without suggesting how to interpret that information for fear of being perceived as persuasive rather than informative. Two additional fears plague the IC—fear of prescribing policy and fear of revealing classified information—and lead the community to hold back on communicating clearly with the public. This can leave a meaning vacuum that is then filled with coherent “explanations” from Hollywood, conspiracy theorists, political elites, and the media.

Believing in a big hairy creature who roams the Northwest is harmless fun for most, but Sasquatch is unlikely to storm the Capitol in an attempt to overthrow a legitimate election. What did storm the Capitol was actually a far scarier monster, fed by Hollywood, subversion, and social and mainstream media. This monster was a lie, one that undermined Americans’

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faith in themselves and the country’s ability to overcome any obstacle.<sup>27</sup> And it has done what no other menace in our history has—cast a shadow long and large over the institution of American democracy. To subdue it, the IC needs to do what it has never before done: tell a story in which the American public can see itself.

### ***How Might the IC Tell Its Own Story?***

Although the IC must stick to the facts, it can learn to present objective information more effectively. But how, specifically? Consider the following:

#### ***► Our belief system forms when we are children.***

Research suggests that kids are susceptible to disinformation/misinformation and are vulnerable to becoming conspiracy theorists by the time they are 14 years old.<sup>28</sup> The IC is inaccessible to the American public, and particularly overlooks children. Although there are a few examples of IC outreach to children and young adults (NSA’s GenCyber and STARTALK, CIA’s Spykids), most efforts involve unremarkable webpages tacked on to an agency’s already limited unclassified presence.

- **Should the IC sponsor efforts to connect with the youngest generations?**
- **What might these efforts look like (e.g., grade school curriculum, more comprehensive/specific social media efforts, YouTube presence, digital literacy and/or critical thinking instruction)?**

#### ***► The American public’s opinion on the IC is influenced by Hollywood.***

Intelligence scholar Amy Zegart found that 38 percent of people who frequently watched “spy shows” believed that waterboarding terrorists was the right thing to do, compared with 28 percent of infrequent watchers of intelligence-themed shows.<sup>29</sup> Shows about the IC must be entertaining to satisfy viewership, but they can also be made both accurate and interesting.

- **Should the IC attempt to correct Hollywood misperceptions with counter narratives? If so, how, and what form should those narratives take?**
- **Alternatively, can the IC convince Hollywood to more factually represent IC activities? How?**

#### ***► Some demographics are more likely to indicate they are unfamiliar with the IC.***

A 2021 public opinion survey found that Black (31%), Hispanic (29%), female (29%), and Gen Z (36%) respondents were the most likely to admit they lacked the information needed to form an opinion on U.S. intelligence.<sup>30</sup>

- **We know little to nothing about why some demographics appear to know less about the IC than others. If this is in fact the case, why?**
- **How could the IC more effectively brand itself to underrepresented demographics?**

#### ***► IC agencies and employees are sizably populated in only a few states.***

In the Washington, DC, area, it is not at all uncommon for a resident to have a neighbor, friend, or family member who works for the IC. The same cannot be said for Idaho, Maine, Louisiana,

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or dozens of other states; these are populations that will likely never meet or hear personally from an employee of the very enterprise that keeps them safe.

- **How can the IC introduce itself face-to-face with its biggest customer—the American public?**

### ***What Would You Recommend?***

The IC is facing a determinative point in its relatively short history. It should not fail to anticipate the American public’s increasing discomfort with its lack of transparency...else it might find itself out of the business of anticipation altogether.

It is imperative that these conversations begin not at the behest of Congress, or upon the demands of the media, or even at the urging of the public. The IC must tackle its compulsive dependence on secrecy from within and solicit solutions from the intelligence officers who know it best.

NIU’s Center for Truth, Trust, and Transparency (Tr3) explores the IC’s complex, changing relationship with the American public, with an eye to options for expanding the scope of IC interaction with those that it serves to defend and also increasingly to inform. The Center invites your responses to the questions above and welcomes your thoughts on how the IC can best be available to the U.S. public, while keeping the nation’s adversaries at bay. To share your ideas, please contact Dr. Pfaff at [Debora.J.Pfaff@odni.gov](mailto:Debora.J.Pfaff@odni.gov) or the NIU Office of Research at [NIU\\_OOR@dodiis.mil](mailto:NIU_OOR@dodiis.mil).

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If you have comments, questions, or a suggestion for a *Research Short* topic or article, please contact the NIU Office of Research at [NIU\\_OOR@dodiis.mil](mailto:NIU_OOR@dodiis.mil).

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