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'No, we don't know where Tupac is':
Critical Intelligence Studies and the Significance of the CIA on Social Media

Abstract

In June 2014, the CIA joined the social media platform Twitter, sparking public interest with irreverent tweets such as 'No, we don't know where Tupac is.' Since then, the CIA's use of social media has continued to demonstrate an uncharacteristically fun and humorous side to an institution more commonly associated with espionage and secrecy. In light of the CIA's social media persona, this article analyses the CIA's tweets and public responses to them by drawing and building upon recent work in Critical Intelligence Studies. We employ a discursive approach that focuses not on the efficacy of the CIA's tweets in terms of their stated goals (i.e. recruitment and PR), but instead asks how particular ideas and practices of intelligence are represented, interpreted, and therefore made possible. By conducting discourse analysis of 1,804 tweets posted by the CIA over a two-year period, we argue that the CIA's use of social media should be understood as a continuation of the CIA's use of popular culture to establish an identity that is vital to the legitimation of the Agency's actions. Our contribution is twofold. Empirically, we provide analysis of the CIA's tweets and audience responses. Conceptually, we demonstrate the contribution that discourse analysis can make to Intelligence Studies in the digital age.

Keywords

Introduction

In June 2014, the CIA published their first tweet on the social media platform Twitter. 'We can neither confirm, nor deny that this is our first tweet' gained much public and media attention, with news outlets claiming that it was 'the best first tweet possible and that it demonstrated that the CIA 'has a sense of humour'.[1] Since then, the CIA's use of social media has been described as 'legendary',[2] with irreverent tweets such as 'No, we don't know where Tupac is' and 'Take a peek into our X Files' demonstrating a fun and humorous side of an institution more commonly associated with espionage, secrecy, and – since the U.S. led War on Terror – torture and extraordinary rendition.

Understanding how and why intelligence agencies use public social media pages on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook has become a topic of concern for those with an interest in intelligence. According to this line of research, factors that drive intelligence agencies to use social media include that it is a low-cost, effective way of generating public relations, especially in the wake of controversies related to the War on Terror and the Snowden leaks.[3] Alongside this, social media is a novel tool for recruiting personnel,[4] and as nearly three billion people now use social media every day, intelligence agencies have turned to social media 'as an exercise in due diligence' complying with requests for more transparent government.[5] The CIA itself states that it uses social media to 'more directly engage with the public and provide information on the CIA's mission, history, and other developments'.[6]

In this essay, we adopt a critical approach and advance Critical Intelligence Studies (CIS) by arguing that the use of social media by intelligence agencies should not simply be understood as a tool for PR and recruitment purposes. We claim instead that when intelligence agencies use social media, they engage in practices of identity construction that narrate themselves and their actions in positive ways, representing themselves and their actions as legitimate. We make this claim for several reasons. First, dominant understandings of

intelligence agencies' uses of social media typically view such use in narrow terms, often framed by the intelligence agencies themselves. Second, intelligence agencies have a well-documented history of using popular culture and the media for purposes beyond PR and recruitment;[7] ignoring this limits our understanding of what intelligence agencies are currently seeking to accomplish with social media. We therefore ask two research questions. How does the CIA use Twitter to represent itself and its activities? And how do audiences respond to CIA tweets?

Our discursive approach analyses how particular ideas, identities, and practices of intelligence are represented and therefore made possible through the CIA's use of Twitter. Our analysis indicates that the CIA's use of social media marks a continuation of the Agency's intervention in, and use of, popular culture to establish an identity that is vital to the legitimation of its actions. This is significant because it demonstrates how, exactly, the CIA now represents itself to the world in a funny, friendly, and informal way on Twitter. Such an informal representation is at odds with the historic representation of intelligence agencies in the press and popular culture, and it marks a shift in how intelligence agencies such as the CIA represent themselves to audiences.[8] We also describe how audiences interpret and respond to these representations, further developing understanding of how intelligence agencies are perceived by the public. In this way, our analysis advances CIS by developing a discourse-analytic approach that examines how intelligence agencies represent themselves and how audiences respond to these representations online.

Critical Intelligence Studies and a Discursive Approach

Our critical approach expands the field of intelligence studies by drawing upon critical theories, concepts, and tools to go beyond the confines of traditional approaches. In doing so, CIS aims to understand how intelligence is implicated in relations of power.[9] Our study draws upon

poststructural discourse-analytic approaches in order to ask questions about the CIA's use of Twitter that are ultimately concerned with understanding the role of social media in making the Agency's activities and practices legitimate. The advantage of a critical approach to intelligence is its concern with understanding how power is distributed, maintained, amassed, and resisted in order to ask vital questions that not only investigate the world as it is, but that can also enable us to consider how it might be otherwise.[10]

Discourse analysis is a mode of research that is concerned with analysing how discourses – understood as language, visual media, and other representational practices – create meaning by representing the world and what happens in it in certain ways. By representing events, the identities of people, and their actions, discourses shape the conditions of possibility in global politics and help to determine how we 'think, feel, and act towards a particular security issue.'[11] In security studies, discourse analysis takes 'account of cultural processes through which insecurities of states and communities – and the identities of the subjects through which insecurities have meaning – are produced, reproduced, and transformed.'[12] Security threats are constructed through discourse, and these threats create an identity (often an 'us') which is threatened (often by a 'them').[13] This happens through the creation of difference; through the opposition to an enemy, and also through the narration of peoples and places, where the stories that are told give meaning to the world and determine what can be done by security actors.

A discourse-analytic approach, which has proven intellectually productive in other areas of security studies, has much to offer CIS. Instead of taking issues, threats, and practices of intelligence as given and asking questions about what to do in this framework, CIS moves to asking how these issues, threats, and institutions came to be perceived in certain ways that make them appear to be natural and normal. Discourse analysis therefore opens up critical potential to reimagine them. Doty explains how this approach enables us to ask 'how possible'

questions of security – whereby we can understand how certain issues come to be constructed as security threats and how certain actions become common-sense or deemed to be in the national interest.[14]

In this study, we take a specific expression of what the CIA is and does – as articulated through their official Twitter account – and consider what identities and meanings are produced. We argue that the CIA performs and creates a new institutional identity on Twitter as a young, open, funny, and informal entity, abruptly different from the serious, secretive, and formal version more commonly encountered in the CIA's official statements, media reports and popular culture representations. This identity matters because it evidences a new expression of legitimacy seeking, that is, the CIA uses social media to deflect the negative associations of the Agency with the War on Terror, the surveillance state, and the Snowden leaks by instead representing itself as an Internet savvy, funny, and friendly institution.

We also explore the role of the audience in interpreting the CIA's representations of itself as we are interested in the relationship between representations of 'secret' intelligence work and their audiences. Here, the 'audience' is Twitter users, and we place the interaction that Twitter enables between intelligence agencies and the public centre stage, showing how Twitter users both accept and resist the CIA's new identity and legitimacy claims.

Within Intelligence Studies there is a burgeoning body of research that uses discourse analysis to study how intelligence practices, industries, and images are constructed online.[15] Several of these studies analyse how intelligence organisations represent themselves, and they explore how these representations serve to create the boundaries of legitimate action. Studies to date have, for example, examined intelligence agency websites to detail how they delineate the scope of security practices,[16] and they have explored how social media is used by security actors to 'communicate and normalize their uses of political violence'.[17] Earlier studies have analysed how the CIA used the *Factbook on Intelligence* on their website in the early 1990's

to secure a 'license to operate and construct for it a supportive operating environment.'[18] Here, discourse analysis evidenced how the CIA used language to claim both a subordinate position – acting on the will of the President – and a professional, self-disciplined identity, ultimately a 'responsible autonomous organization endowed with a will to act in accordance with US law and American values' as an attempt to renew its legitimacy after the end of the Cold War.[19]

Our work builds on these foundations. We explore how the CIA's use of Twitter creates a particular public image of the CIA. We develop Connell and Galasinski's claim that what the CIA publishes online creates 'a lived relation to the CIA and its actions'[20] for global audiences by showing how this is done via social media. First, we look at Twitter, a platform built on audience interaction and direct communication which is a part of people's everyday experiences in a way that the CIA's official statements, policy documents, and website are not. Second, we analyse audience comments as a way to consider the impact of how the CIA represents itself on Twitter. We do this in recognition of the interaction between a text and its audience as the site where meaning is made and 'common sense' is established or challenged. Third, emboldened by previous work, we emphasize the significance of the CIA's relationship with popular culture and the communicative moments that might be deemed trivial in other studies. We do this to demonstrate the need for Intelligence Studies scholars to take these issues as seriously as the CIA itself already does.

The CIA and Social Media

'We can neither confirm nor deny this is our first Tweet' was met with laughter,[21] shock,[22] and hostility.[23] Despite being viewed as a novel development, it is important to place it within the history of the CIA's engagement with the public through an active press department and longstanding interventions in media and popular culture. As Aldrich writes, 'perhaps the most common misperception concerning modern intelligence agencies is that they have attempted

to live in the shadows'.[24] The CIA has not only a long and reciprocal relationship with the press,[25] but it has also actively intervened in the way it is represented in popular culture, precisely because the public conception of what intelligence could, should, and will do matters.[26] This position was formalized through the creation of the CIA's Entertainment Industry Liaison Office in 1997, although the CIA has been involved in 'image management' since its inception.[27]

Collaboration with TV and film producers is not distinct to the CIA, and the relationship between the military and the entertainment industries has been referred to as the 'military industrial media entertainment network',[28] where state actors use the media and entertainment industries to pursue their own goals. The CIA has been able to cooperate with, and influence the production of, popular cultural texts that represent the CIA including (but not limited to); Alias, 24, and Homeland, as well as films like The Recruit, Zero Dark Thirty, and Argo.[29] It is imperative that we analyse how intelligence agencies represent themselves through popular culture – and nowadays on social media – given that intelligence agencies dedicate time and resource to this activity themselves.

The CIA claims they intervene in popular culture to ensure accuracy, but as Jenkins argues, this relationship and the resultant representations go far beyond 'accuracy,' as they influence public views of what is possible and permissible for the CIA to do.[30] Scholarship on the CIA and popular culture analyzes what these shows depict, what these representations enable and why this matters for Intelligence Studies. The CIA's arrival on Twitter needs to be understood within historical context. Traditional relationships between the CIA, the press, and other producers of popular culture have now transformed as the CIA now directly interacts with its audience on social media. The use of social media is a new form of interactive communication, requiring new forms of engagement and, as we evidence, enables the CIA to develop a new identity.

How intelligence agencies use social media has not received widespread academic attention, though there are two notable exceptions.[31] Both of these studies investigate Twitter instrumentally – viewing it as a tool that intelligence agencies can use to pursue their own goals. For example, Landon-Murray suggests social media offers an opportunity to strengthen the relationship between the public, political bodies, and intelligence agencies. He then assesses how effective intelligence agencies are at utilizing these tools through an analysis of their Twitter and Facebook updates. He concludes that because agencies were not sharing substantive information or maximizing the interactional facets of social media, they were failing to achieve any meaningful education goals and instead were using social media as an exercise in 'due diligence more than anything else'. In Landon-Murray's account, one of his eleven categories of classification for what intelligence agencies share on social media is 'miscellaneous', and he provides no analysis of this category. In our study we demonstrate that there is a great deal of power and politics precisely within the miscellany of weird, wonderful, and hard to categorise social media posts published by intelligence agencies online.[32]

McLoughlin et al. provide an analysis of GCHQ's use of Twitter, and they suggest social media performs five functions for intelligence agencies: to provide information, a means of delivering services online, a way to interact and engage with audiences (in ways that might ultimately shape policy), as a tool for impression management, and finally, as a tool to build consent and legitimacy. They provide a content analysis of tweets, and split the content into four categories (loosely mapped on to the five functions). Within the 64% they categorize as dedicated to addressing news events (though within this they actually include tweets that celebrate events, highlight history, link to popular culture or include statements from the GCHQ director), McLoughlin et al. suggest that such content falls under the purpose of 'raising awareness of the organisation's activities and role, promoting a particular type of culture, and promoting trust in their functions',[33] although they do not explore how this takes place. They

acknowledge the use of humour but do not engage with it beyond linking humour to the popularity of GCHQ's account.[34] By using a network analysis of GCHQ's Twitter audience, they consider the reach of this content, finding a significant cluster around conspiracy theories in interaction with the account and indicating a failure to reach a more diverse audience.[35] They suggest that there are merits to the use of Twitter as a means to achieve particular communicative goals, and as a tool for engagement.

These studies provide a useful starting point; however, the discourse approach that we take differs from prior studies in significant ways. We are not aiming to measure the success of the CIA's twitter account against its own stated aims, as that would privilege the CIA's position and assume a transparency and coherency to their strategy that might be lacking. It would also over-state the authorial position of the CIA while at the same time underestimating the importance of the linguistic construction, identity moves, and legitimating effects of Twitter when used by security actors. Instead of a marketing/branding analysis of the success of the strategy, the more pressing questions are about how intelligence agencies' social media outputs impact public understandings of what these agencies are, what they do, and how these understandings, in turn, impact the scope of what they can do in practice. Attention to the broader ways that the CIA's tweets are entangled in the discursive creation (and maintenance of) the CIA's identity (and ultimately its legitimacy) engages us methodologically in a much closer reading of the tweets and the responses they engender from the public, as we discuss below.

A Discourse Analysis of the CIA's Tweets

We collected each tweet posted by the CIA over a two-year period starting from when the Agency joined Twitter on June 6, 2014. This time frame was chosen to provide a sufficient data set covering the first two years of the CIA's tweets, and it contains information about

1,804 tweets including their URL, message/content, the number of likes and retweets, and whether they included any form of visual media. Following discourse analysis, the language and visual media of these tweets were then analysed to understand a) what the CIA deems to be true, b) how the CIA attributes meaning to what it represents, and c) how the CIA positions subjects and identities in relation to one another.[36] We also collaboratively coded the tweets inductively according to their main theme. Our approach differs from other studies of intelligence agencies on social media as it pays specific attention to how intelligence agencies attempt to construct knowledge, attribute meaning to the world, and represent the identities and actions of themselves and others. While network analysis may demonstrate who the audiences of intelligence agencies are, our discourse analysis of what English-language audiences say in response to the CIA's tweets provides an insight into what they think and feel about the CIA via their own words, images, memes, and gifs.

On average during its initial two-year period, the CIA posted 71 tweets per month, gained 71,309 likes and retweets from other Twitter users every month, and each tweet gained an average of 1,325 likes and retweets. Due to the diversity of tweets, we found that broad categorizations were limiting and reductive of the important nuances of the tweets published by the CIA. Therefore, we do not present a quantitative analysis of the CIA's tweets by their specific theme. Instead, we focus on three aspects that are apparent across our data set but are particularly prescient in the top 20 tweets published by the CIA in terms of the total number of likes and retweets received (see Appendix 1).

Together, these tweets are important because they have the most reach and are therefore likely to have been seen by the largest number of people. Due to the way in which Twitter's algorithm works, it is not possible to see exactly how many people saw the tweets, or who they were, but we can understand how audiences interpreted these tweets by analysing the comments published in response to them. We now explore how the CIA's tweets and audience

responses to them construct and position identities, narrate the world, and claim legitimacy for the actions of the CIA.

Identity: friend not foe

By far the most popular tweet posted by the CIA during our two-year period of analysis is the CIA's very first tweet: 'We can neither confirm nor deny that this is our first tweet'. This tweet launches the CIA's presence on Twitter by playing with the popularized notion that the CIA can neither confirm nor deny information. It invokes a clear sense of what the CIA is (a secretive intelligence agency) but ironically adapts the Glomar response (named after the CIA first used this phrase in response to a journalist's questions about the CIA's use of a ship called the *Hughes Glomar Explorer* to attempt to recover a Soviet submarine in 1974) for the digital age. The tweet clearly is the CIA's first tweet, but it signals an important and rather paradoxical puzzle: what is the CIA (an agency responsible for the state's most important secrets) doing sharing information for all to see on a social media platform?

The CIA's presence on Twitter quite literally humanizes the agency, as it writes in the first-person plural, suggesting it is not a faceless government agency, but a team of people with a sense of humour, an understanding of popular culture, and - as shown in *Figure 1* - a cat. This tone contrasts sharply with the CIA's own Twitter bio: 'We are the Nation's first line of defense. We accomplish what others cannot accomplish and go where others cannot go.' The CIA's tweets are funny and befit the platform and the audience it is addressing, where other security actors also use a humorous style of communication: a shift caused by the development of social media that favours a shareable, amusing, and informal style.[37] However, even if the CIA is simply using a contextually appropriate style, it is important to consider the effect that this has. Humour is a discursive strategy that enables the CIA to establish an appealing, humanized identity, and humour works to establish friendly social relations that serve to legitimise the

activities of political actors.[38] This 'marketable ordinariness' serves a purpose and this appeal to the everyday is a discursive strategy.[39] When state agencies use humour on social media they sanitise and draw attention away from the violence of their activities, and this state-sanctioned use of humour has largely developed in response to growing public criticism of state violence on social media.[40]

The humour of the CIA's tweets arises from the ironic self-awareness demonstrated by the CIA. These tweets don't play upon public mistrust of the institution. This strategy does not just make light of controversies such as extensive surveillance, it serves to *make it light* - to move it from the realm of serious political engagement into ironic comedy. Moreover, it creates a particular identity for the CIA as self-aware and reflexive. This matters because it gives audiences the impression that the CIA is an institution that is not only aware of its flaws but able to reflect upon them—without it having to actually demonstrate such reflection beyond making jokes on social media. Humour is an emergent communicative tactic that functions to maintain power and resist democratic control.[41]

The CIA's self-referential humour combines with popular cultural references (explored below) to enable the CIA to construct an identity that is youthful, open, cool, diverse, and funny. It is an identity that the audience is not only expected to like, but to identify with. This identity is articulated through the content and tone of the tweets, and it serves to normalize, domesticate, and legitimise particular intelligence activities while at the same time obscuring others - such as violent acts, extraordinary rendition, indefinite detention, and drone programs. For example, in another of the CIA's most popular tweets, it wrote: 'No, we don't know your password, so we can't send it to you. #sorrynotsorry' and playfully suggested that the CIA does not conduct domestic surveillance, or at least not in a way that will affect U.S. audiences. It uses a humorous hashtag and acknowledges that the business of the CIA is surveillance – but not of *you* or *your* activities.

This humorous identity is in stark contrast to how the CIA has previously claimed legitimacy through its use of the Internet, whereby the CIA represented itself as a 'thoroughly disciplined organization' committed to professionalism and moral values.[42] On Twitter, the CIA does not seek legitimacy via an appeal to authority, efficacy, or efficiency, nor does it project the familiar all-American hero trope of being strong, hard, ruthless, and successful.[43] The CIA projects a new identity on Twitter that demonstrates more than a shift in communication practices, or recruitment aims, but that speaks to the very idea of what the CIA is and does, and why the public should support it.

Typically, Critical Security Studies has focused on how states secure their own identities through practices of insecurity articulated against a common enemy.[44] This research has seen the CIA's identity publicly constructed against a particular national threat - be it communism in the Cold War era or Islamic extremism in the War on Terror.[45] However, on Twitter, there is not an appeal to a common enemy but rather the invocation of a common identity grounded in the social media vernacular of popular culture references, memes and 'lols'. Such an identity serves to depict the CIA as a relatable institution, tacitly claiming legitimacy for their actions while also deflecting negative representations of the CIA in the wake of recent controversies during the War on Terror.

Intertextuality: popular culture and history

The CIA's twitter feed is intertextual; it is a space where the 'real world' of intelligence overlaps with the 'reel world' of TV dramas, chat shows, and even rap conspiracy theories. The second most popular tweet posted by the CIA states 'No, we don't know where Tupac is', in reference to the conspiracy theory that the rapper Tupac, who was shot and killed in 1996, did not die and is living in hiding.[46] This tweet is the CIA's most popular tweet that refers to popular culture. As with other tweets published by the CIA, this tweet is playful in tone and

implies that the CIA is not the omniscient surveillance power that is often portrayed. It also demonstrates the salience of the CIA using popular culture as a way of engaging audiences.

Several other of the top 20 most popular tweets in our study also invoke references to popular culture. 'Take a Peek Into Our #XFiles 5 docs for Mulder & 5 for Scully #TheTruthIsOutThere 👽' shared a link to the CIA's website and two photographs of unidentified flying objects taken in the 1960s. In response, the Twitter account for The X Files television show replied: '@CIA Thanks for the help! 👽 #TheXFiles'. Other tweets made reference to popular culture, for example, one stated 'maybe we'll run out of stories and have to tweet cat photos. #CIACat #Twitterversary'. Given the popularity of cats and animals on the internet it is perhaps unsurprising that this tweet was so popular. Alongside others on the theme of popular culture, the '#CIACat' tweet (featured in *Figure 1*) represents the CIA as being *au fait* with internet culture, memes and 'lolcats.' The popularity of these tweets on the topic of popular culture serve to create an identity of the CIA as a youthful, humorous, and informal institution.
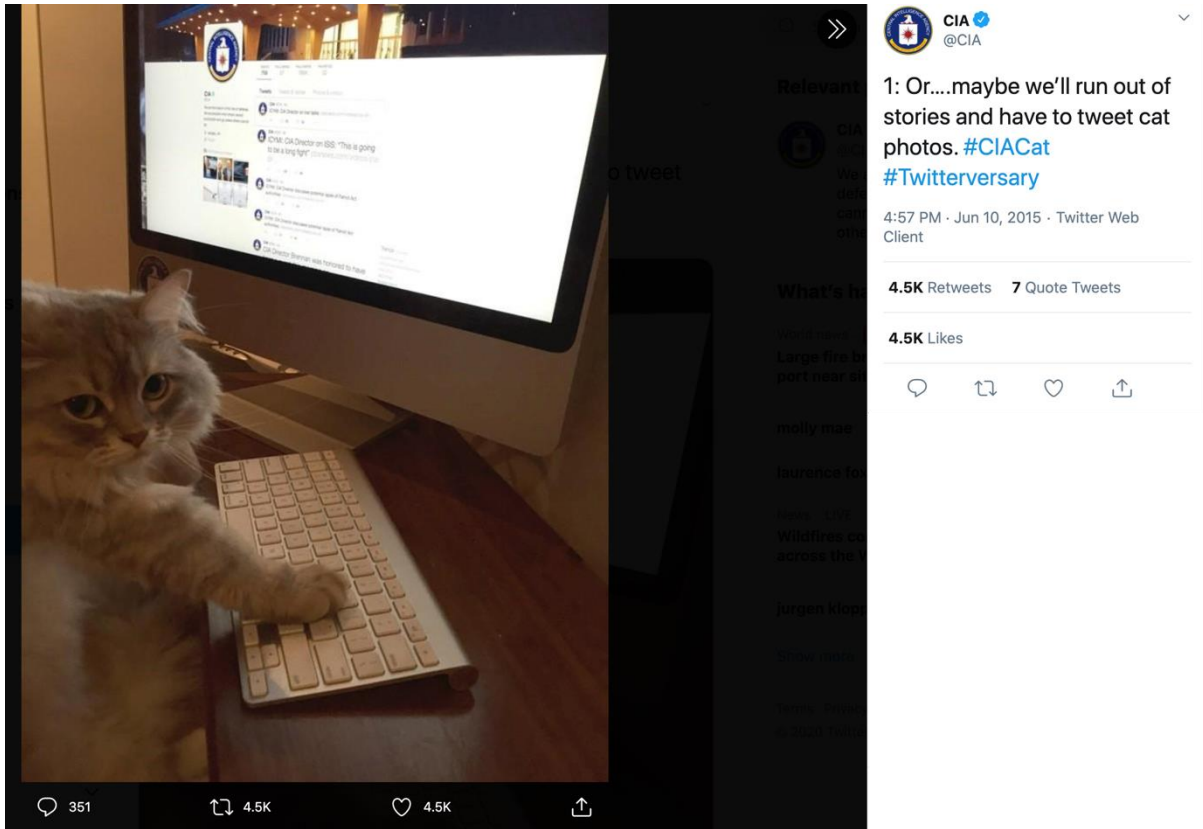
Figure 1: '#CIACat' by the CIA on twitter

The CIA's engagement with popular culture is a clear example of intertextuality. References to talk shows, conspiracy theories and cats are domestic, familiar, and safe, and this tactic serves to distance and 'tame' the violence of the Agency. The CIA's tweets move the CIA out of the shadows and into 'our' shared cultural experience as a benign international symbol of US power. This shift is important because the tweets do not just distance the CIA from the actual practice of security but serve as a 'distorting process, a playful, perverse refusal of accountability.'[47] Studies that overlook popular culture, intertextuality, and miscellany in how intelligence agencies use social media fail to account for the social and political significance of how intelligence agencies are now representing themselves in novel ways. Recognising that the use of social media by intelligence agencies is a development that stems from prior interactions between intelligence agencies and cultural producers can enhance Intelligence Studies.[48] Analysing the content intelligence agencies publish on social media and the responses they receive helps us to better understand how intelligence agencies attempt to

claim legitimacy for themselves and their actions, and provides an insight into the impact social media has on public perceptions of intelligence.

Alongside the theme of popular culture, the CIA also frequently tweets about its contemporary and historic activities. Besides two tweets commemorating those who lost their lives on 9/11, what is notable about the CIA's reference to its current and historic activities is that it maintains the playful, humorous tone used to tweet about popular culture. One key example of this tone is their decision to retweet the raid on Abbottabad that culminated in the death of Bin Laden. On the fifth anniversary, the CIA tweeted 'To mark the 5th anniversary of the Usama Bin Ladin operation in Abbottabad we will tweet the raid as if it were happening today. #UBLRaid' and then proceeded to 'live tweet' the event. This activity provoked controversy as some audiences felt it was inappropriate, 'grotesque and embarrassing,'[49] with one person stating, 'I get @CIA desire to take a victory lap but tweeting #UBLRaid seems contrary to Intel Community ethos & good judgment'. Even so, the tenth most popular tweet published by the CIA states '#UBLRaid: 3:39PM Bin Ladin found on third floor and killed'.

An apparently popular refrain within the CIA is 'the secret of our success is the secret of our success', and yet in the invocation of particular successes (their own, and of the nation), it is telling a particular story of the CIA and of America. The presence of 9/11 is not surprising given its significance in shaping the recent history of the CIA. However, the CIA's deeply controversial involvement in the War on Terror – literally re-lived online through a 'social media re-enactment'[50] of Bin Laden's killing – is only alluded to through tweets about an event that is the CIA's least controversial moment of 'success'. Of the CIA's top 20 tweets, the #UBLRaid tweet is the only one that represents the CIA as a perpetrator of violence.

Public perceptions of the CIA are constructed through intertextuality – where people may read about the CIA in the press, watch their agents in Hollywood films, and follow it on Twitter. On social media, the CIA plays upon its sanitized popular culture representation while

also using these references to represent itself as a cool and relatable institution. In previous accounts of intelligence agencies and social media, intertextuality and popular culture have been understudied, but they do so much to create an identity of the CIA on Twitter, and they shape how the public perceives what the CIA is and does.

Audiences: 'fetch me Agent Lolz'

The success of the CIA's use of humour and the familiarity of the audience with the intertextual references to popular culture matter to the way these tweets are understood by their audience. The audience here in the first instance are Twitter users, though of course the tweets are public and so have reach beyond the 'Twittersphere,' as they are reported on by national and international media outlets. Here, we focus in particular on direct responses to the CIA's tweets in order to explore the ways that audiences interpret the CIA's representation of itself.

The identity that the CIA expresses on Twitter is both accepted and challenged by the audience. We see a set of responses that actively applaud the CIA's Twitter account. Some responses to their first tweet included: 'Clever first tweet. Thx for not droning on,' 'Haha. Well done' and 'BEST FIRST TWEET EVER!'. These positive responses show the success of both the tone and the content. Both the CIA's tweets about Tupac and #CIACat were met with similar positive reactions such as 'Ha. That's epic', and 'Tweet of the Year. Easily.' One even stated 'This social media account is the best. Love your guys love your shit. Funniest guys on the net.' In response to #CIACat we see responses that suggest it has convinced them to follow the CIA on Twitter: 'well, I'm sold. #followed'. One reply used the parlance of internet memes and stated that 'CIA cat is watching you tweet!' in reference to the meme of 'ceiling cat is watching you masturbate'.[51] These replies demonstrate that audiences become invested in the CIA's construction of a humorous identity and find its tweets funny and appealing.

Audiences also engage with the CIA in a similar tone and style, and this reciprocity shows how the CIA's humorous identity is successful and reproduced by the audience. For example, in response to the CIA's 'No, we don't know your password' tweet, audiences replied in a similar humorous tone. 'That's the NSA's job, no?' and 'but you "know a guy" right?' show how the CIA's use of humour is reproduced by audiences.

Significantly, even seemingly more critical reactions to the CIA often accept the humorous tone. Even if the jokes don't 'land', audiences do not reject the ability of the CIA to take on this identity. Such tweets suggest that audiences find the tweets humorous, and people replied in a similarly playful way. For example one reply stated 'Hilarious... Oh snap--now they can track my tweets!' referring to recent controversies over state surveillance. Another replied '"Hmm...since Snowden, faith in the intelligence services is at an all time low. Boys, start a Twitter account and fetch me Agent Lolz"' This reply itself gained 104 likes and 51 retweets, and ironically suggested the CIA's Twitter account is being run by 'Agent Lolz.'

We also see responses that challenge the very premise of the tweets. For example: 'And WHY the hell would y'all need twitter???' and other replies such as 'of all the insidious shit that the @CIA is responsible for, the forced attempts at humour are almost forgivable. Almost.' Similar responses such as 'Should I laugh or be nervous that the CIA is crackin jokes?! #dilemma' further highlight this situation. One person replied to the #CIACat photo with the 'how do you do fellow kids' meme of Steve Buscemi posing as a teenager to highlight how the CIA is cringeworthy in its attempts to be 'down with the kids' (see *Figure 2*).

Figure 2: 'How do you do, fellow kids?' A response to '#CIACat'

Other audience members further challenged what the CIA is doing on Twitter and highlighted how the CIA's tweets are a waste of their taxes and a detriment to the work the CIA should be doing. One exchange involves one person who referred to these tweets as 'BS [bullshit]':

A: How about doing some actual work? You know, spying, undermining ISIS

B: You do realize that accounts for large organizations like this are usually ran by a PR Company, not actual spies.

A: You realize that my complaint is taxpayers are paying for BS from an agency that has nothing to do with its mission.

There were also other critical engagements with the CIA's tweets. In response to #CIACat, one audience member asked 'was that cat kidnapped, drugged, flown to a secret prison and tortured', in reference to the nefarious activities of the agency.

Reponses to the live tweet of the Bin Laden raid demonstrate the contestations of these views. In response to the CIA's social media reenactment, some people replied with congratulations: 'woah! congrats!' and some ironically challenged the CIA's social media reenactment by commenting with 'yay for celebrating murder!'. Others again turned to the vernacular of social media with comments such as 'pics or it didn't happen', 'can we get a picture of Bin Ladin or do we just have to take your word for it?' and 'release the photos' all indicating that people doubt the CIA's account due to the lack of visual evidence. One user even cracked a joke - 'usama bin dyin am I right? ;)' and another asked 'why are you live tweeting Zero Dark Thirty? It's a good film and all but why?' subsequently drawing attention to the intertextuality of politics and popular culture in their engagement with the CIA.

The diversity of responses to the CIA's tweets is important in understanding how the CIA's Twitter feed functions to represent a particular identity of the CIA and depict certain activities as legitimate. Even where their jokes fail, the acceptance and engagement with the CIA on an interpersonal and humorous level suggests a new type of relationship between the CIA and the public. Here, the CIA is normalized as a funny, human, safe, open, and accessible organization rather than a secretive security actor responsible for the use of violence. However, at the same time, the CIA's new identity is also challenged and rejected by other, more sceptical

parts of the audience who are given the opportunity to challenge and resist the messages they see online. The analysis of audience interpretation is absent from previous studies of intelligence agencies on social media. However, it is crucial to understand what audiences say online because it reveals how representations in popular culture create particular understandings and expectations related to intelligence, and it demonstrates how the legitimacy claims of intelligence agencies are accepted or rejected.[52]

Conclusion

The most popular CIA tweets are jokes, not threats. They are cats, not policy documents. They are about rappers and TV shows, not CIA directors. From cat pictures to Tupac references, the CIA's tweets seem far from the simple stated aim of providing 'information on the CIA's mission, history, and other developments'.[53] The fact that on Twitter the CIA does not tweet as a serious branch of government engaged in the serious business of national security does not mean that their use of Twitter should not be taken seriously.

We have directly engaged in the popular cultural references, the flippant tweets, and the memes because we argue that they evidence an attempt to construct an additional identity for the CIA; one which works to (re)secure their position in relationship to their primary audience - the public. This particular identity - funny, young, engaged, 'hip', successful, self-aware and informal - is not only appropriate for the digital age, but it also makes the CIA relevant, approachable, and legitimate for the social media audience it is addressing. It reinvents the CIA for a (younger) generation of American – and global – citizens. In doing so, it moves away from the mistakes and controversies of the recent past. A self-referential joke about surveillance works to literally 'laugh off' the controversies of the Snowden revelations, without any need to address any particular changes in activities or behaviour. Commemorating the Abbottabad raid emphasizes the success of anti-terrorism activities, and overshadows the

controversies of indefinite detention, torture, and drone strikes. Pictures of cats at desks are a far cry from pictures of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, and they counter such widespread images of what the CIA is and does by emphasizing the friendly, the funny, and the human.

How the CIA as an institution and intelligence as a practice are seen, understood, and engaged with by the public matters because it shapes how those actors and activities are granted legitimacy or contested as illegitimate. If you get the CIA's updates as you scroll through your phone, it is no longer the faceless government 'man', operating in the shadows. According to their tweets, the CIA don't just work for you, it is just like you, and is normalized as being funny, cool, and personable. Where this identity construction is successful, the 'CIA next door' is a much more benign presence.

Discourse analysis of the CIA's tweets demonstrates the utility of a discursive approach to intelligence. Future work adopting a discursive approach could work to consider and compare the ways the CIA represents itself across different forms of popular culture, social media, in different places, with different audiences, and across different moments in time. Scholars have recognised the importance of investigating popular culture representations of intelligence because they shape public understandings and expectations of intelligence agencies. A discourse analytic approach, particularly when combined with an attention to audiences, allows us to explore how meaning is made, negotiated, accepted and resisted in relation to intelligence practices. The reality of intelligence practices matters less to public understandings of intelligence than the ways these practices are mediated and represented to them through popular culture, and increasingly through social media. Discourse analysis provides a way to unpack and explore these meanings, and crucially, to ask how they might be transformed. With that in mind, future work should further explore the thoughts, feelings, and characteristics of audiences who follow intelligence agencies online.

While much of this discussion might seem banal or trivial to a scholarly community used to dealing in the serious work of intelligence, espionage, and national security, we suggest that it is imperative to understand how intelligence agencies use popular culture and social media if we are to understand how institutional power is wielded, secured, and maintained in the contemporary moment. We have not forced popular culture into the intelligence space and lexicon. It was already there. Or to put it more concisely: we did not bring Tupac into this; the CIA did.

Notes

1 The Guardian, 'CIA Sends First Tweet.'
2 PR Daily, 'CIA hit Storytelling Stride.'
3 Dover and Goodman, *Spinning Intelligence.*
4 McLoughlin, Ward and Lomas, 'Hello World: GCHQ Twitter.'
5 For example in America there is the Open Government Initiative and Directive of the Obama administration. Landon Murray, 'Social Media and US intelligence', 7.
6 CIA Director John Brennan in BBC, 'CIA launches Twitter', unpaginated.
7 Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? & The Cultural Cold War.*
8 Zegart, 'Spytainment.'
9 Bean, 'Critical/Cultural Intelligence Studies', de Werd 'Critical Intelligence Studies.'
10 see, Krause and Williams, *Critical Security Studies.*
11 Taylor et al, 'Fearful Engine of Power', 116-117.
12 Weldes et al. 'Constructing Insecurity', 2.
13 Campbell, *Writing Security*.
14 Doty, 'Foreign Policy Social Construction.'
15 Buluc, 'The Role Of Discourse'; MacDonald and Hunter 'Discourse of Post-9/11.'
16 Hunter and MacDonald, 'Security Discipline.'
17 Jackson, Crilley and Manor, 'Militarization 2.0', 3.
18 Connell and Galasinski, 'Cleaning up its act', 169.
19 Ibid., 170.
20 Ibid., 169.
21 The Guardian, 'CIA Sends First Tweet.'
22 Oremus, 'CIA on Twitter.'
23 Groll, 'CIA's First Tweet.'
24 Aldrich, 'Regulation by Revelation?', 17.
25 Johnson, 'CIA and the Media'; Hewitt and Lucas, 'All the Secrets'; Willmetts, *In Secrecy's Shadow* and 'Cultural Turn in Intelligence.'
26 Jenkins, *The CIA in Hollywood*; Barrett, Herrera and Bauman, *Hollywood and the CIA* and Dover and Goodman, *Spinning Intelligence.*
27 Jenkins, *The CIA in Hollywood*.
28 Der Derian, *Virtuous War*,
29 Kumar and Kundnani, 'Imagining National Security'
30 Jenkins, *The CIA in Hollywood.*

31 McLoughlin, Ward, and Lomas, 'Hello World: GCHQ Twitter'; Landon Murray, 'Social Media and U.S. Intelligence.'
32 Joachim and Schneiker, 'A Gender Discourse Analysis', 500.
33 Ibid, 241.
34 Ibid, 243.
35 Ibid, 242.
36 Doty, 'Foreign Policy Social Construction', 306.
37 Rasmussen, 'Welcome to Twitter.'
38 Crilley and Chatterje-Doody, 'From Russia with lols.'
39 Rasmussen, 'Marketable Ordinariness .'
40 Wood and McGovern, 'Memetic copaganda'
41 Ibid
42 Connell and Galinski, 'Cleaning up its Act', 183.
43 Jeffords, *Hard Bodies;* Boyle, 'Rescuing Masculinity.'
44 Howards and MacDonald, *Emergence of Security Discourse;* Campbell, *Writing Security*; Weldes et al, *Constructing Insecurity*.
45 Jenkins, *The CIA in Hollywood.*
46 Ironically, Tupac's 1991 song 'I Don't Give A Fuck' features the lyric 'Fuck you to the CIA.'
47 Cohn, 'Sex and Death', 698.
48 Saunders, *Who paid the piper?;* Van Veeren 'Interrogating 24'; Willmetts, *In Secrecy's Shadow*.
49 BBC, 'Bin Laden Death.'
50 Crilley, Gillespie and Willis, 'Tweeting the Russian revolution.'
51 Know Your Meme, 'Ceiling Cat.'
52 Crilley 'Where we at?'; Pears 'Ask the Audience.'
53 See note 7.

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Appendix 1: Top 20 Most Engaged with CIA Tweets 2014-2016

	Content of tweet	Date	Retweets	Likes	Total Engagement
1	We can neither confirm nor deny that this is our first tweet.	06/06/2014	325835	256321	582156
2	No, we don't know where Tupac is. #twitterversary	07/07/2014	218254	144274	362528
3	RT @POTUS: Today we honor a man who challenged us to bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice. Let's keep working to realize Dr. K…	18/01/2016	31813	50855	82668
4	Thank you for the @Twitter welcome! We look forward to sharing great #unclassified content with you.	06/07/2014	13677	16663	30340
5	No, we don't know your password, so we can't send it to you. #sorrynotsorry #twitterversary	07/07/2014	13641	10432	24073
6	Sorry for not following you back @TheEllenShow. But if you visit us maybe we can take a selfie?	07/07/2014	4072	6562	10634
7	Take a Peek Into Our #XFiles 5 docs for Mulder & 5 for Scully #TheTruthIsOutThere 👽 http://1.usa.gov/1SCbcjj	24/01/2016	4861	5513	10374
8	1: Or….maybe we'll run out of stories and have to tweet cat photos. #CIACat #Twitterversary	06/10/2015	5233	5073	10306
9	To mark the 5th anniversary of the Usama Bin Ladin operation in Abbottabad we will tweet the raid as if it were happening today. #UBLRaid	05/01/2016	5265	4385	9650
10	#UBLRaid: 3:39PM Bin Ladin found on third floor and killed	05/01/2016	4236	3480	7716
11		09/09/2014	4283	3092	7375
12	Remember reports of unusual activity in the skies in the '50s? That was us. #U2Week #UFODAY http://1.usa.gov/1lU3oIU	07/02/2014	3869	2255	6124
13	3:30 pm EDT - @POTUS watches situation on ground in Abbottabad live in Situation Room #UBLRaid	05/01/2016	2486	3551	6037
14	RT @GeorgeHWBush: Moving return to Langley and Memorial Wall today. The stars represent @CIA agents whose heroism is unknown to most. https…	29/01/2016	1520	3543	5063

15	YES, we are hiring. http://1.usa.gov/1qOxdOa #twitterversary	07/07/2014	1927	2219	4146
16	Happy 90th to our former boss @GeorgeHWBush! #TBT Badge photo from his days as CIA Director http://1.usa.gov/1kRl5Zf	06/12/2014	1732	2148	3880
17		09/11/2015	2046	1741	3787
18	Too many speech tweets earlier today? #lessonlearned #transparency	06/11/2014	830	2317	3147
19	To today's #USMNT last line of defense @TimHowardGK, good luck from the Nation's first line of defense. #USAvBEL #IBelieve #1N1T	07/01/2014	1655	1478	3133
20	4: In our second year we are going to ▮▮▮▮▮ #▮▮▮ #Twitterversary	06/10/2015	1672	1361	3033