Unsurprisingly, the Jason Bourne films won't tell you much about ASIO.Bourne Supremacy screenshot/Universal

The cloak-and-dagger exploits of characters like James Bond and Jason Bourne have shaped our cultural idea of spy work. But these films, made mostly in the US and UK, have little to do with the reality of Australian intelligence.

Public perception of groups like the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD), the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS), and the Australian Geo-Spatial Intelligence Organisation (AGO) is tied intimately with their overseas counterparts, and particularly their portrayals on the silver screen.

Take the Bourne movies (2002-16) and Zero Dark Thirty (2012), the latter of which offers a controversially dramatised account of the hunt for Osama bin Laden. Both have cast intelligence in a sinister light.

The United States' use of torture, shown in film through images of waterboarding and other forceful techniques, has sullied the image of American intelligence work, and by extension Australia's.

Despite President Donald Trump's call for their return , these practices remain disendorsed in the US and explicitly prohibited in Australia, but the taint lingers.

Is Zero Dark Thirty fact or fiction?

Overreach versus oversight

This bad reputation continues in Oliver Stone's 2016 biopic Snowden , which portrays a man intent on uncovering the underhanded practices of the US National Security Agency (NSA) as it collected data on American citizens without clear legal sanction.

Edward Snowden's revelations were widely hailed at the time as a boon for civil liberty. But anecdotal accounts indicate they have reduced trust within the "Five Eyes" network and damaged international relations – including between Australia and Indonesia .

Snowden's actions, both in reality and as depicted on screen, have contributed to a popular idea of signals intelligence as an intrusive and malign force. Yet the Australian experience stands in contrast to that perception of American counterparts, in my opinion, thanks in part to tight legislation and oversight.

Snowden official trailer.

Most people don't realise that local intelligence agencies are held accountable through several mechanisms that have emerged over recent decades, particularly in the wake of a number of r oyal commissions .

These include the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security (IGIS), the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security (PJCIS), and the Intelligence Services Act (ISA), which sets out the rules governing the ASIS, ASD and the AGO. But of course this doesn't make for dramatic viewing. Laws passed in Australia to collect telecommunications metadata, although polarising, are also unlikely to make it onto the big screen.

Getting intelligence right

More recent movies like 2016's Eye in the Sky , featuring Helen Mirren as a British colonel, ar

e more accurate
in their depiction of the current intelligence status quo.

Many of the capabilities on display in the film are real, particularly the way in which technology such as aerial sensors, signals intelligence, satellite imagery, and human agents on the ground has enabled ever more detailed, time-sensitive and actionable intelligence, and the moral questions this generates.

In Eye in the Sky, Mirren's character and her bosses face choices about the relative value of a successfully targeted terrorist ringleader and an innocent child who inadvertently enters the missile target zone. Such fraught decisions can haunt intelligence practitioners for the rest of their lives.

Still, the preference for exaggeration is not going away. Increasingly, the plots of shows like Ho meland
and
House of Cards
depict intelligence operations being used to coerce opponents and sully the political process.

These portrayals are often accurate, to a point, demonstrating technical surveillance capabilities and the limitations of analysis that crosses cultural and linguistic boundaries. Still, directors and producers are understandably inclined towards more drama rather than less.

But with so much cynicism aimed at the various intelligence agencies, thanks in part to the Jason Bournes of this world, as well as a broad range of emerging intelligence and security challenges, periodic reviews of oversight and governance arrangements are important.

Eye in the Sky's North American trailer.

We must ensure that all groups tasked with border security and countering violent extremism are incorporated under existing governance arrangements like the aforementioned PJCIS and the IGIS. We should also be more transparent with the community about the purposes and function of these activities.

While not yet the subject of a blockbuster film, the tragic Bataclan killings in Paris, as well as the Nice, Berlin and London vehicle attacks, point to the enduring game of cat and mouse played by terrorists and intelligence and police authorities seeking to track down an ever more wary and surveillance-savvy adversary.

Recent revelations on the ABC's Four Corners program Power and Influence about the activities of China-backed organisations also point to the growing challenge of state-derived intelligence.

Australia's intelligence and security agencies are adapting to increasingly sophisticated threats. Perhaps the 2016 Australian miniseries Secret City is a prescient indicator of some of the "nefarious deeds" the future may hold for us.

John Blaxland is Professor of International Security and Intelligence Studies and Head of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at ANU. He is a former military director of joint intelligence operations and one of the authors of the three-volume history of ASIO.

Authors: John Blaxland, Professor, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University

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