

This Message Will Self-Destruct (Or Not)

The world of the uber-cool spy has been a subject of box-office gold for decades. Who doesn't love to see a suavely-dressed super-spy fighting his way through a ridiculous number of enemies with the sly grace of a ballet dancer? Throw in a few martial arts moves, some ultra-techy equipment and the plans for an invisibility cloak hidden inside a priceless diamond and you've got the makings of a hit!

Unfortunately for us, the world of the real 21st-century spy is much more prosaic. They probably aren't Oxbridge-educated or Savile Row-clad (sigh!). They most likely aren't using snazzy technology or concealing an armoury of hidden weapons (deeper sigh!). They really aren't taking a private jet to an undisclosed exotic island to oust a dictator in hiding. They're more likely to be sitting at a desk in their cubicle at a private intelligence-collecting organisation in the UK. (Feel free to fall across your desk in the feigned sleep of boredom.)

Here's your quick lowdown, then, on how the real thing differs from the Hollywood version. It may not be as exciting, but it is true.

1. According to real spies interviewed by an online news forum, the internet, iris scanner, facial recognition software and social media have all meant the demise of the secret identity. There simply isn't the technology on earth to fool everything all the time, making the point of secret identities, well, pointless. You'll have to find some other use for that fake moustache.
2. Many spies don't work for governments at all. It is estimated that 70% of the US intelligence budget is spent on private contractors who collect and analyse the data needed to keep a country like America safe. The real government employees who spy will often work from desks in embassies around the world, protected with diplomatic immunity from any real danger of being taken to an evil mastermind's lair and threatened with the shark tank.
3. While some spying really is done with high-level technology, the information gleaned this way is often less useful than low-level snippets of information. Details about local weddings, family trees and drunk texts make up much of the 'intel' collected by intelligence agencies. It turns out that the satellite images of enemy encampments and the night-vision goggles aren't as useful as knowing what community events are planned, when villages are without power or which towns have reliable drinking water. This knowledge is called 'open source' and the tiny snippets of information can be collected, analysed and put together to form a real picture of what is going on.
4. Since secret identities are useless and all the material needed is low-level gossip, the image of the spy has changed completely. According to a BBC article, today's secret agent is unlikely to be Oxbridge-groomed. The spy needs to have three things: street smarts, intelligence and the ability to be a 'grey man': someone who can blend seamlessly into the crowd. In any society, this is unlikely to be an upper-middle-class, white British male with a penchant for expensive tailoring!