

## Netflix's *Secret City* shows how technology is changing spycraft

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Photo: Netflix

In one scene in *Secret City*, the 2016 Australian series now playing on Netflix, a spy comes to a park with a bag of bread crumbs, feeding birds as a cover for picking up an encoded message. It's a classic trope, but the twist here is that the spy is picking up a SIM card rather than a note or a whispered message.

The Cold War ostensibly ended with the fall of the Soviet Union, but a new one is heating up, pitting the [United States against both China](#) and [Russia](#) in an arms race that relies far more on computer programmers than on nukes. In its six-episode first season, *Secret City* taps into current geopolitical tensions by combining elements of a spy and techno-thriller, following political journalist Harriet Dunkley (Anna Torv of *Fringe* and *Mindhunters*) as she tries to uncover a conspiracy involving cell phone hacks, encrypted video, darknet information exchanges, and cyberattacks.

Working from the novels *The Marmalade Files* and *The Mandarin Code*, by political journalists Chris Uhlmann and Steve Lewis, *Secret City*'s writers avoid making any of those plot elements feel like meaningless buzzwords, or excuses for characters to give tutorials on cyber-espionage. There are brief descriptions of the uses of onion routing, or how burner cell phones can create false text chains. But other tricks, like putting electronic devices in a refrigerator ahead of a secret rendezvous, pass by without comment even though they're straight out of [Edward Snowden's playbook](#). *Secret City* emphasizes modern threats, but it still integrates plenty of old-

school spying techniques. At one point, Harriet notices she's being tailed while heading to a meeting with a Chinese dissident, and she feels a false comfort when she loses the car following her. She only discovers later that she was being separately tracked through a device planted on her vehicle.

The series divides its action between the newsroom, the [Cabinet of Australia](#), and the Australian Signals Directorate, the agency responsible for collecting foreign intelligence. The writers deftly hit all the right notes for each component. Harriet's past political coverage got her paper sued for libel, so she's pushed from her pursuit of the conspiracy to a human-interest piece involving an Australian college student detained in China, after a protest over the treatment of Tibet. She's constantly reminded that print journalism is a dying field, but knows the reach she can get by delivering the right story over digital and social media platforms. Meanwhile, *Secret City*'s political subplots pit senators of different parties against each other as they try to determine the best course for their country, while the intelligence plot focuses on a senior analyst having a crisis of conscience. All three segments, plus Harriet's protestor story, are intertwined in a complicated web of intrigue, and the key players in each sphere must come together to unlock the full extent of the machinations at work.

Another update to the standard thriller formula is *Secret City*'s unabashedly feminist bent. Starting with gender-flipping Uhlmann and Lewis' protagonist, *Secret City*'s writers made all of the story's biggest power players women, relegating most of the men to roles as tools or villains. That cast includes Signals Directorate analyst Kim Gordon, played by Damon Herriman in yet another example of the unfortunate trend of [casting cis actors in trans roles](#). Kim, who was married to Harriet before transitioning, does get nearly as much screen time as she deserves. She provides both some of the most clever spy work, and a way to delve into the fact that trans acceptance isn't a binary condition. Harriet considers Kim her best friend even after their divorce, but their relationship is fraught with feelings of betrayal. When a scene between Harriet and Charles Dancer (Alex Dimitriades), Kim's former lover, turns romantic, Harriet expresses surprise that he likes women. Charles' matter-of-fact response is that Kim is a woman.



*Secret City* is most similar to the BBC's *The Hour*, another six-episode series that puts a driven reporter at the heart of a spy story in part driven by hostile foreign powers seizing influence over their trade routes — the Suez Canal for *The Hour*, and the South China Sea for *Secret City*. Both also offer the perspective of a Western democracy caught in the crosshairs between more powerful entities. Oscar winner Jacki Weaver plays the biting funny, brutally competent attorney general Catriona Bailey, who insists that Australia must protect itself from Chinese aggression both by maintaining a close military alliance with the United States, and by launching a Patriot Act-style cyber-monitoring program. Daniel Wylie plays her chief political rival, Minister for Defense Mal Paxton, who consistently comes across as weak and unlikeable, even when he's right. His suggestions that Australia doesn't need to compromise its values or independence to protect itself is painted as weakness by both Bailey and US ambassador Brent Moreton (Mekhi Phifer), who seamlessly moves from charmingly folksy in public to delivering cutting threats in private.

Set during the Obama administration's [pivot to Asia](#), *Secret City* has already become dated in some ways, while eerily prescient in others. America is no longer seeking to extend its influence in the Pacific, and the idea of it eagerly offering military aid to an ally seems laughable in Donald Trump's transactional world. But a piece of legislation [introduced in Australia in April](#) to allow the country's cyber-spies to monitor citizens bears an eerie resemblance to the policies Bailey supports. In fact, the show practically provides a roadmap for how a democracy can slide closer to authoritarian power as governments choose to sacrifice their citizens' free speech and privacy in the name of safety.



*Photo: Foxtel*

Bailey, a member of Australia's conservative Labor Party, dismisses her country's liberals as more likely to sit around "crying into their quinoa" than to get anything done. She manipulates the press by finding sympathetic reporters she can use to publish the stories she wants, and denying access when it doesn't serve her purposes. When she learns that Paxton has secrets involving his time in China, she both gives him a Trump-style nickname — "Chairman Mal" — and proves that even the best-intentioned politicians can be compromised, and forced to work against the principles they're meant to uphold. She also understands that facts don't have to get in the way of a good narrative. When confronted about her shadier dealings, she attacks her accuser's credibility, glibly explaining, "There's a difference between what's true and what's plausible."

The original Cold War was a battle of ideology. Even shows like *The Americans*, which made Soviet agents sympathetic and illustrated how reckless the United States could be, still largely portrayed the forces of democracy and capitalism as the good guys. With China and Russia respectively being communist or democratic in name only, it's no longer clear what each power stands for. The United States isn't portrayed in a particularly positive light in *Secret City* — its leadership is much more interested in achieving its goals than defending the values of liberal democracy. Given that season 2, which began filming in February, is titled *Secret City: Under the Eagle*, it seems unlikely that the show intends to start portraying the United States in a more heroic light. It can be easy to long for the simplicity of those earlier narratives, where the morality, threats, and spycraft were all easier to understand.

But *Secret City* is compelling because it lives in the present, challenging viewers to keep up with its portrayal of rapid changes in technology and politics.