Surveillance and Classification of Information in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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Abstract

In recent years, surveillance and classification of information—primarily by governmental or pseudo-governmental organizations—has been in the forefront of American and international consciousness. While research has been done regarding the policies and rhetoric surrounding those actions, little exists to address how these topics are addressed and portrayed in popular culture. This paper seeks to begin to fill that gap by asking the following question: how does the Marvel Cinematic Universe address and represent surveillance and classification of information, and how does that representation differ from the expected discourse. The Marvel Cinematic Universe, of which the first film was released in 2008, is the highest grossing film franchise in history and has been seen by people around the world. As such, its ideas and messages have been circulated and viewed not only over a wide swath of the population but also over a diverse one. Through the use of transcribed and coded statements and conversations within the Cinematic Universe from Iron Man which was released in 2008 through the first season of Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. which finished airing May 2014, patterns related to surveillance and classification were identified. Those patterns—specifically concerning surveillance of and classification of information from non-members of an organization by that organization, as well as deviations from expected discourse—are discussed in this paper. By framing these deviations in relation to the real world, such as in the analysis of the differing reactions to the major defining incident within the franchise and to the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, this paper is able to ground its findings in modern concerns and understanding. As such, this paper provides a comprehensive analysis of Marvel's implicit and explicit discussions of surveillance and classification of information, which are helping to shape the current generation's opinions on those topics.

Keywords: Marvel, Surveillance, Classification

1 Question and Background

What are the discourses surrounding surveillance and classification of information presented in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), as well as the deviations from the expected rhetoric?

On May 2, 2008, the film *Iron Man* was released in the United States, making over four times its budget in box office sales and beginning what is, as of July 30, 2014, the second highest grossing film franchise in history. The Marvel Cinematic Universe, which began with the release of *Iron Man*, is a live-action film and television franchise. A number of the original films were released by Paramount Studios, though the rights of all but *The Incredible Hulk* were acquired by The Walt Disney Studios in July 2013.

As of July 30, 2014, the total worldwide lifetime gross of the franchise was $2,621,728,529. *The Avengers*, which was the highest grossing of the films, had a total worldwide lifetime gross of $1,518,594,910 and was released in 4,349 theaters domestically. The total foreign lifetime gross was $895,237,000. The franchise was released in theaters

around the world, showing in at least fifty-nine countries and every continent except Antarctica[1]. Given those numbers, the reason for researching this franchise should be clear: the MCU is a global phenomenon, being seen by people around the world. Because of this widespread fame, large numbers of people, many of whom are affected by government surveillance and classification of information, have viewed the series and potentially had their opinions formed at least in part by it.

2 Literature Review

There is very little literature analyzing the world created by Marvel, and especially the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Jeanne Holland's 2012 article "It's Complicated: *Spider-Man 2*'s Reinscription of "Good" and "Evil" in Post-9/11 America" takes on a more contemporary part of Marvel, examining the 2004 film *Spider-Man 2* as an analogy for 9/11 and the American response following it.[2] The analysis focuses primarily on the ways in which the film represents the attacks and the subsequent reactions, only delving into the political issues that resulted from the September 11, 2001 attacks as they related to the analogy.

The closest that the literature gets to analyzing surveillance and classification of information in Marvel is in Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison's 2014 article "Fighting the Battles We Never Could: *The Avengers* and Post-September 11 American Political Identities."[3] It must be noted that this is not the focus of the article; instead, the focus is on the presentation of various American identities—Captain America's traditional warfare and black-and-white morality, Iron Man's new war and disagreement with authority, Black Widow's former Soviet ties—and their connection to 9/11 and a post-9/11 world. The ideas of surveillance of enemies—and friends—is addressed, though, as well as the concealment of SHIELD's weapons systems.

This paper's contribution to the literature will be in adding to the discourse regarding Marvel's portrayal of surveillance and classification of documents, as well as the inclusion of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, which was released so recently that there has been very little chance to study it so far.

3 Methodology

The first step was acquiring the discourse regarding surveillance and classification of information from the MCU. The MCU, as of July 30, 2014, contains nine movies and one season of one television show. Seven of those movies had partial or complete transcripts or scripts available online, and those were then checked against and/or completed from the video of the film. Following this checking and/or completion, each script was read through to identify and mark dialogue related to the topics of surveillance, classification of documents, and the broader topic of actions taken in the name of safety, peace, or freedom. This third category exists to catch related discourses which may not immediately or directly fall under the categories of surveillance or classification of documents.

The remaining movies and television show were individually time-coded and then transcribed from the time-codes. In this context, time-coding refers to watching through the video and writing down beginning and ending times for all relevant dialogue.

Data was collected only from the films and television shows themselves, excluding the related MCU shorts and comics, as well as public comments by the writers, directors, producers, actors, or anybody else involved. This is so data could be limited to what those who watched the movies in theaters and watched the television show would have seen without having to make additional purchases or seek out additional information. This also allows for the removal of any potential issues where an individual involved with the production makes a statement that adds to or changes the canon of the universe.

After the dialogue was acquired, the next step was to code the data so it could be broken down into more specific groupings. The three discourses that the data was broken down into are surveillance, classification of documents, and actions taken in the name of peace, safety, or freedom. A dialogue may fall under multiple discourses. Surveillance in this context is defined as the watching, covert or overt, of an individual or group for the purpose of information collection or location tracking. Classification of information in this context is defined as the concealing or withholding of information, or the deliberate systematic release of misinformation as a means of concealment, whether text-based or not, within or without an organization. The last coding was a catch-all category for dialogue that might tangentially relate or be used as a justification.

Each discourse is then separated into categories. For both surveillance and classification, a distinction was made between internal—surveilling or classifying from members of the group doing the action—and external—surveilling

or classifying from those outside of the group, such as members of the public. Classification of information has an additional coding for the acquisition and concealing of information by a member outside of a group from those within the group.

For all dialogue, the speaker and the listener are identified. For dialogue with multiple speakers, the speaker giving the dominant opinion is identified as the speaker, and the other major member of the conversation is identified as the listener. For each speaker and listener, their affiliation or assumed affiliation at the time of the dialogue is identified. For a double-agent, the coded affiliation is that of the group they appear to those around them to be part of. However, if necessary in context, their true affiliation will be coded for instead.

For each discourse, the opinion being presented by the speaker is coded. This is show in Figure 1, where the two axes are necessity—whether or not the action being taken must be done—and positive versus negative opinion—whether or not the action being taken is positively viewed or "good".

Necessary Good	Unnecessary Good
Necessary Evil	Unnecessary Evil

Figure 1. Opinion Coding

Beyond these categories are the codes for neutral and indeterminable. Neutral generally refers simply to the fact that the concept is mentioned without the speaker expressing an opinion regarding it. Indeterminable is used for dialogue where the dialogue is relevant without the opinion being clearly discernable. For classification of information, a final opinion coding exists. That code is for when the opinion being expressed is negative towards classification of information but also negative towards releasing that information for profit.

The order that the dialogue appears in is also coded for. This is done in two independent ways. Both release order—order in which the dialogue appeared in theaters or on television—and chronological order—order in which the dialogue was spoken in in-universe time—are coded for. For the second type, for example, a scene set in 1945 would be coded as being earlier than a scene set in 2010, even if the scene set in 2010 was from a film released earlier.

4 Analysis

Surveillance and classification of information have an impact, whether large or small, in virtually every aspect of the MCU. In the beginning of *Iron Man*, the incidents are unremarkable: there are satellite feeds of military actions, and Tony Stark decides to withhold from the Stark Industries database because he doesn't know who to trust. By the end of the first season of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (*AOS*), the information classified by Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division (SHIELD) has been released into the world, and some members of a criminal organization have cameras implanted into their eyes so their handlers can keep track of them.

The group that most commonly utilizes both surveillance and classification of information is SHIELD. Members of SHIELD express positive sentiments towards internal or external surveillance and classification of information 91 times throughout the franchise, more than any other affiliation. Beyond that, though, this approval of those actions can be seen through simply the work being done by SHIELD itself.

> **Senate Investigative Committee Member:** *"Well, he could explain how this country is expected to maintain its national security now that he--and you--have laid waste to our intelligence apparatus."*

That quote, spoken to Natasha Romanoff at the end of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* during a senate committee hearing, was in regards to the dissemination of information after the fall of SHIELD and the attempted rise of HYDRA. Two points become immediately clear from that statement. The first is that SHIELD was considered an intelligence apparatus for the United States. The second—which becomes abundantly clear throughout the franchise—is that national security is one of the major justifications used for surveillance.

The idea of SHIELD being the intelligence apparatus for the United States is an interesting concept. It seems obvious at first: it is based in the United States, with its major buildings in the major cities of the United States. The Triskelion—the headquarters of SHIELD—is located on Theodore Roosevelt Island in the Potomac River. Most of the members are American, and one of the only ones who is not originally American defected from the Soviet Union

to join the Western bloc after a SHIELD member sent to kill her changed his mind. On the other hand, though, following the fall of SHIELD, the antagonistic relationship between SHIELD and the American military becomes clear. The American military, led by General Talbot, takes over the SHIELD locations that didn't fall to HYDRA, such as the Hub and, later, Providence. It becomes evident that SHIELD wasn't American in the manner that America seemed to have thought of it as being; SHIELD belonged to SHIELD.

4. 1 Surveillance

> **Phil Coulson:** *"We're sweeping every wirelessly accessible camera on the planet. Cell phones, laptops, if it's connected to a satellite, it's eyes and ears for us."[4]*

SHIELD monitors people both outside of and within their organization. As an intelligence agency, the former action is obvious and what will be focused on in this paper. This appears in a number of different forms, most of which are evident through the dialogue and conversations in the franchise. The organization monitors people in a number of different ways, such as through tapping into phones to aggregate their camera data, using satellite tracking, and using traffic cameras. There is also a great deal of undescribed surveillance that allows SHIELD to keep track of various groups of people such as those on the Index, a list of people with superhuman powers, as well as ostensibly keep track of virtually everything else that is going on in the world. This indicates a massive and virtually unrestricted level of surveillance capability.

Project Insight is the most extreme of surveillance presented in the MCU. The plan, had it been implemented, would have, as described by SHIELD director Nick Fury, been implemented thusly:

> **Nick Fury:** *"Once we get them in the air, [the helicarriers] never need to come down. Continuous sub-orbital flight courtesy of our new repulsor engines…. These new long-range precision guns can eliminate a thousand hostiles a minute. The satellites can read a terrorist's DNA before he steps outside his spider hole. We're gonna neutralize a lot of threats before they even happen."[5]*

This project would allow for SHIELD to track any person in the world, as well as using that information to target them remotely. This design actually comes from HYDRA, the neo-Nazi organization that seeks to take total control of the world under the belief that people aren't capable of looking out for themselves. At the end of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, the project is dismantled and the helicarriers taken out of the sky by Steve Rogers, Natasha Romanoff, Maria Hill, and Sam Wilson. This is done, however, not because of a fundamental disagreement with surveillance but because the helicarriers are being controlled by HYDRA, which is seconds away from killing millions of people who do or may someday oppose HYDRA.

The ideas of protection of the public and of keeping the peace are two of the prominent justifications used for surveillance, and especially external surveillance. One of the next common reasons is that surveillance is necessary to find a dangerous individual to either detain or stop them. *The Incredible Hulk* illustrates this with the American military's efforts to find Bruce Banner. This becomes even clearer in *The Avengers*, when nearly limitless efforts are expended to find Loki after he steals the Tesseract from the Joint Dark Energy Mission Facility.

> **Phil Coulson:** *"We never lost you, Doctor. We've kept our distance, even helped keep some other interested parties off your scent."[6]*

Surveillance is justified by two main arguments, both related to protection. The first is protection of the individual being surveilled. This argument is used in two different cases. The first, as illustrated in the above quote, is when a group—primarily SHIELD—keeps track of an individual or group of individuals that they perceive as a threat. In the above quote, that person is Bruce Banner, who would be a threat because he turns into the Hulk when angry or threatened. In episode 5 of *AOS*, the individuals are those on The Index, which lists all those whom SHIELD has found who have special abilities.[7]

> **Jemma Simmons:** *"It's a list SHIELD keeps of people and objects with powers."*
> **Phil Coulson:** *"A short list, meant to protect them."[8]*

This sentiment rings false in both cases; given SHIELD's other actions, protection of the individuals on The Index—or of Bruce Banner—does not seem to be at the top of SHIELD's list of priorities. The other case in which this argument is used, however, seems to have more validity to it. Surveillance is in some cases used to monitor people with whom SHIELD members have personal ties. This is clearest in episode 10 of AOS when Coulson admits to knowing the location of his former girlfriend in Portland.[9] It is easy to believe that he is having someone keep an eye on her for her own protection, because he has a personal emotional attachment to her.

In both cases, surveillance is presented with the possibility of additional action. People are watched so that, if necessary, SHIELD, the United States government, or anybody else doing the surveilling could step in and help them if they are put in danger. For the Index, the idea also includes a person being a threat to themselves. Either way, there is an assumption that, though the surveillance may be passive, it will result in action.

> **Ian Quinn:** *"Don't you get it? SHIELD's against everything you stand for. They're Big Brother."*
> **Skye:** *"Maybe, but they're the nice big brother who stands up for his helpless little brother when he's getting beat up…"[10]*

While this conversation implies much the same idea of protection, there is a stronger feeling of paternalism—or, in this case, fraternalism—associated with it. Surveillance is presented as being not just for protection being done out of military necessity or a sense of responsibility but out of care for those being surveilled. This "big brother" rhetoric also separates out the government from the idea of the nameless men in suits that makes governmental officials so frightening.

> **Jasper Sitwell:** *"Zola's algorithm is a program for choosing Insight's targets."*
> **Steve Rogers:** *"What targets?"*
> **Jasper Sitwell:** *"You, the TV anchor in Cairo, the other Secretary of Defense, a high school valedictorian in Iowa City, Bruce Banner, Stephen Strange, anyone who's a threat to HYDRA now or in the future."[11]*

Surveillance as a means to protect against outside threats—as a way to protect the organization doing the surveillance—is the other main justification for surveillance. This conversation illustrates that best: HYRDA is implementing Project Insight, arguably the most comprehensive and powerful surveillance project created, as a means to track down and kill any of those who would threaten HYDRA. While this argument is not particularly appealing to those outside of the organization, it does make a strong argument for those within it.

> **Phil Coulson:** *"It's our only option. Every government agency in the world will be on our ass. We need to vanish."[12]*

On the other hand, there are a number of arguments that are generally made against surveillance. Probably the most prevalent of the reasons against surveillance is the fear of the person or organization performing the surveillance. In the above quote, Coulson is expressing his fear that he and his team will be caught by one of the many organizations that is currently looking for them—most pressingly, the United States armed forces—and detained. In this case, the fear is not necessarily for personal physical safety, but instead of detainment and prosecution. In other cases, the fear is about physical safety. Skye warns a man with superpowers that "you never know who's listening,"[13] when she is advising him to be careful of the men in dark suits who are going to come after him and take him away to control or experiment on him. This fear of the surveiller often manifests in as fear of the government, though that is not universally true.

> **Franklin Hall:** *"Now you've finally found a place where the watchdogs can't touch you."[14]*

This argument is a general one against the government. Surveillance itself isn't the enemy. Rather, it is a manifestation of all that people stand against when they stand against the government. Much of this discourse comes from either Skye, who begins as a member of a group against the government and specifically against what is perceived as government abuse of power, or Ian Quinn, who moves to Malta as a way to avoid government or SHIELD

intervention. Government is presented as "watchdogs" or men in dark suits who want to hunt down people with powers or keep people from doing what they want.

> **Ian Quinn:** *"You're free to do what you do without Big Brother watching over you."*[15]

In some cases, people refer to the evil of "Big Brother," which in this case refers not to the specific leader of the Ingsoc party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* but a general totalitarian or overreaching government. The point is to create the negative imagery of Big Brother in association with a specific government or government in general, as "Big Brother" suggest a totalitarianism that is viewed negatively in most Western thinking.

4.2 Classification of Information

> **Eric Selvig:** *"You can understand how a man could go off like that. I mean, a big, faceless organization like yours, coming in with their jack-booted thugs and stealing private property…."*[16]

SHIELD is known in the MCU as being secretive and manipulative, often confiscating people's research and classifying it to make it inaccessible outside of the organization. The above quote is—in a roundabout way—Eric Selvig's response to SHIELD taking all of his and Jane Foster's research and equipment concerning an Einstein-Rosen Bridge following the arrival of Thor. This isn't even the first time in *Thor* that SHIELD hides information; within hours of the arrival of Mjölnir—Thor's hammer—in New Mexico, SHIELD has the area locked down, keeping people from town away and diverting aircrafts from flying over it.

> **Phil Coulson:** *"Remember the panic when that anti-matter meteor splashed down just off the coast of Miami, nearly devoured the city?"*
> **Skye:** *"No."*
> **Phil Coulson:** *"Precisely. Because we kept it quiet and contained."*[17]

SHIELD also has a tendency to hide potentially life-threatening events from the general public. Just as the entire incident in New Mexico was hidden, so are other potentially disastrous events or objects. The quote in question comes after an 0-8-4—code for an object of unknown origin—is found in Peru, and Skye asks whether she should post the information about it online to warn those in the area about it. In the end, she doesn't, hiding the information just as SHIELD hides information about incidents like that on a regular basis.

> **Maria Hill:** *"They have access to tech, to formulas, secrets they're not ready for."*[18]

Classification of information is justified primarily using the rationale of protection. This protection is not simply about protecting people from outside threats but also from themselves. People are presented as being not able to be trusted with advanced technology because they will inevitably abuse it. This idea is reinforced by the events of AOS, when advanced technology, much of which comes out of the reveal of alien technology post-*Avengers*, is used to perform human experimentation and commit crimes. Additionally, information is concealed to prevent panic, as in the conversation presented earlier between Phil Coulson and Skye.

> **Phil Coulson:** *"That information cost a man his freedom, and you sabotaged our attempt to remedy that."*[19]

In some cases, the protection is not for the one who would otherwise be told the information but instead for a third party. In essence, Person A withholds information to protect Person C. The case that the quote is addressing is one where the Index has been sold to a member of Centipede, a criminal group, which then abducted a man who appeared on the list. For the Index and lists like it, the classification of that information is not for the protection of either SHIELD or anybody who might find out but instead for those on the list. Similarly, the man who survived the massacre of his team after they rescued Skye as a baby kept his secret hidden not only for his own protection and the protection of anybody who might hear it but also for Skye's protection.

> **Ian Quinn:** *"We think very much alike--more freedom of information, less government infringing on everyone's rights--I'm a fan."*[20]

There are a number of arguments made against the classification of information. One common argument against the classification of information is that information is or at least should be free. Some of these arguments are for the true freedom of information, as with the Rising Tide, while others, such as in Quinn's case, are for freedom of information controlled by the government, while maintaining control of proprietary information. This mirrors common rhetoric used in the United States, such as with the Freedom of Information Act.

> **Tony Stark:** *"Time for a little transparency. Now let's see what's really going on."*[21]

One common piece of rhetoric against classification of documents is the cry for transparency. This appears solely in regards to the government or governmental organizations, and is almost never explained beyond the use of the word. It seems to be a general desire, encompassing accountability, freedom of information, and whatever else the person or group may want from the government at the time.

> **Skye:** *"Well, just because you're reasonable and...firm...doesn't mean that you're not an evil, faceless government tool bag."*[22]

The call for transparency is often in conjunction with a dislike or distrust of the government. As with surveillance, the argument is as much about the government as a whole, or governmental action, as it is about classification of information itself.

> **Franklin Hill:** *"It's amazing how much money you made off free information."*[23]

One last argument is that, while information should not be classified, it also should not be sold. Information is to be free not only in the sense of being accessible to the public but also in the sense that nobody should monetarily gain from it. The disdain or even disgust for the idea of selling information tends to come from the people who truly believe in what they are saying, those who are willing to sacrifice to maintain the freedom of information.

5 Deviation from Expectations

5.1 Public Agreement, Private Dissent

Frequent in the franchise is the juxtaposition of public agreement with private dissent. For virtually every activity, members of SHIELD speak only positively of their organization when speaking to someone who is not a member of SHIELD. This positive representation of SHIELD by SHIELD agents is best illustrated as such:

> **Phil Coulson:** *"We're the good guys, Ms. Foster.*[24]

In this incident, Coulson is in the middle, on behalf of SHIELD, of confiscating Jane Foster's life work to keep secret information about an alien and a magic hammer that fell from the sky to land in New Mexico. By most standards, this would seem at the very least distasteful, yet Coulson expresses no regret or indication that he wishes the situation could be different. Not only is SHIELD presented as being in the right, they are presented as being good. On the other hand, when SHIELD members speak to each other, they are much more likely to criticize their own actions and the actions of the organization.

> **Jemma Simmons:** *"He shut me down, told me to keep it in-house. I mean, this drug could be a phenomenal breakthrough, could save countless lives."*[25]

This quote is by a SHIELD member, being spoken to another SHIELD member on her team about another SHIELD member also on the same time. While this is conversation is alone not illustrative of what is being discussed, it exemplifies a larger pattern within SHIELD of keeping disagreement purely in-house, on issues ranging from personal disagreements to national security. Even the personal ones are about issues with SHIELD policy such as internal surveillance and classification of information.

> **Felix Blake:** *"You know our chat wasn't exactly private."*
> **Phil Coulson:** *"They never are."*[26]

This is a more obvious acknowledgement of the lack of privacy that exists not only for those in the general public but for those within SHIELD. Given the rest of the discourse within the franchise, this acknowledgement is unlikely to be made to a non-SHIELD character. The classification of documents which allows access to some documents to all SHIELD agents while excluding all non-SHIELD agents[27] gives the feeling of "us against the world." SHIELD solidarity is codified in SHIELD rules, so they must be seen to stand together, but at the same time the agents are human, and as such don't agree one hundred percent of the time. Those disagreements end up being private.

While these conversations and quotes pertain more strongly to internal issues—issues for which an argument can be made that the dissent actually is public, as it is reaching all those for whom it is relevant—the other rhetoric is notable in its absence. Specifically, there is no indication of whistleblowers—or those who wish to be whistleblowers—despite the overarching and easily abused powers held by SHIELD. In *The Avengers*, for example, the World Security Council—the secretive oversight committee for SHIELD orders that a nuclear bomb be sent to kill the alien invaders, destroying Manhattan in the process. Despite the efforts of SHIELD director Nick Fury, a SHIELD member does send the weapon, and it is only through the actions of Tony Stark acting as Iron Man that the city isn't destroyed. Given that SHIELD carried out an, albeit unsuccessful, attack on American soil, one would think some of its more conscientious or moral members would speak out against it, something which likely would have been mentioned in the franchise given *AOS*'s focus on public backlash against SHIELD as a major plot point. However, this is never addressed by an otherwise—in some cases—angry public. That is only one example of how making dissent purely private within SHIELD is significant.

5.2 Appeals to Authority

> **Phil Coulson:** *"I trust the system. They keep secrets for a reason."*[28]

Interestingly, this appeal to authority is only used to justify internal classification, and is almost exclusively—with a few exceptions, some of which are debatable—used when SHIELD agents are speaking to other SHIELD agents. Coulson uses this appeal to authority when speaking to Skye before she has entirely affiliated herself with SHIELD, but in the same conversation she reiterates that she wants to be part of SHIELD, so that exception could be discounted, putting that case in the same category as all those where two SHIELD agents are speaking to each other.

It is possible that this is simply a continuation of the idea of private dissents versus public agreement, though it doesn't seem to entirely fit. SHIELD agents are reminding each other of their place; they are reaffirming that, indeed, they must trust the system. They must follow the rules. This doesn't seem to fit with the idea of SHIELD that is created, especially up to and through *The Avengers*, of a SHIELD that is unified with agents who are entirely rules-based.

Perhaps this occurs because of the private dissent, where the SHIELD that the viewer sees from the outside is SHIELD's public face, the face of agreement and unity, and inside there is enough dissent that they must remind each other of their place. On the other hand, the timing of all of the dialogue must be noted. All of this dialogue is from after *The Avengers*; in fact, it is all from *AOS*. The argument can be easily made that, in the MCU world, *The Avengers* changed everything, as the Battle of New York revealed the existence of aliens and of SHIELD to the world, opening up a new realm of possibilities for the public to act on. On one hand, this would affirm the idea that this stems from an issue of private dissent, as this is the first time the viewer is really seeing inside of SHIELD, but on the other hand, perhaps it instead indicates a disintegration of SHIELD beyond and before the reveal of HYDRA, as much of this dialogue occur before the events of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*.

Regardless, the other question that this raises must be addressed. Why is this rhetoric never used when speaking to those outside of SHIELD, when it is the most common rhetoric when SHIELD agents speak to each other about classification of information? One possibility is relatively simple: the public doesn't have the same level of rigid infrastructure of bureaucracy and laws to fall back on as their "system". The authority that SHIELD subscribes to isn't the same as the one the general population does. At the same time, though, most members of the general public do

have authority figures, and even if they don't follow the SHIELD system, there are systems. Perhaps there is a view that that suggestion will be ineffective, that if somebody is attempting to break the rules by accessing or releasing classified information, they are already past trusting the system, and the suggestion will be lost on them. This, then, is as much a statement about the public as about SHIELD; people have lost faith, this suggests, and it has reached the point where no amount of talking will convince them.

To return to the idea of changing opinions, though, there is a person for which this is not the case. If Skye were to be told in the pilot of *AOS* to trust the system, or that classification of information is for the good of anybody, or that it is right because the law says so, she would, based on her previous comments, likely scoff. Her tune, however, changes by the end of the series.

> **Skye:** *"You were right all along. Having all this out there in the world makes it too dangerous, and now..."*[29]

This perhaps suggests that members of the public can be shown the light, so to speak, and begin to see that classification of information is necessary. Perhaps only actions will convince people, though, rather than words.

5.3 The Battle of New York as the September 11 Attacks

> **Maria Hill:** *"The Battle of New York was the end of the world. This-- now--is the new world."*[30]

On the surface, it is easy to see the Battle of New York as an equivalent of the September 11 attacks. As an analogy, it is both powerful and obvious: flying enemy warriors rain down from the sky of Manhattan, threatening to destroy the city. The physical end result was different, but the real change was psychological. The threat became real. Just as before September 11, the threat of danger existed before the Battle of New York, but it was hidden, unsuspected partly because people didn't know expect an alien invasion and partly because nobody—for the most part—knew that this was even a possibility. Examining the movies that came prior to *The Avengers*, the reason for this is evident. In the *Iron Man* films, the enemies were entirely human: a corrupt businessman colluded with terrorists in both. The enemy in *The Incredible Hulk* was a rogue mutated soldier, and in *Thor* all information about the alien enemy was carefully covered up by SHIELD. Following the Battle, however, the threat was known to the public, leading to a widespread feeling of fear and danger in the MCU.

One would suspect, then, given these clear parallels, that the reaction would be the same. As evidenced by laws such as the Patriot Act, the post-9/11 reaction was in the direction of allowing for greater powers to be held by intelligence and law enforcement facilities in the United States. Huge amounts of information was classified for national security purposes. Surveillance capabilities expanded dramatically. Most laws that were proposed in regards to national security passed with bipartisan agreement—even ones that were later deemed unconstitutional. Between the rhetoric and the legislation, everything seems to point to the public and the government being willing to do anything to prevent another 9/11.

The reaction following the Battle of New York was practically diametrically opposite in direction. The public realized that the government and—primarily—SHIELD had been keeping them in the dark, and they grew angry. The people who knew and cared about what was going on—which was not everybody, as many people didn't have the capability or will to question what the government and SHIELD were saying—often began working against SHIELD as a means of protesting SHIELD's actions. Skye and others began working in groups such as The Rising Tide, a "hacktivist" group that would steal and release to the public classified information. Businessmen such as Ian Quinn moved to states such as Malta, with which SHIELD had no agreement and as such could not legally enter.

The question is then raised: why was the response so fundamentally different? One possibility is that Al 'Qaeda succeeded, while the Chitauri failed. Following the September 11 attacks, the rhetoric became "this must never happen again." Following the Battle of New York, however, the tone went more towards "we stopped it once, so we can stop it again." The first type of rhetoric leads to the feeling that one must be willing to do virtually anything to stop another attack, and if that means compromising morals, then so be it. The second type tends more towards the idea that it was stopped once—by superheroes, instead of by men in suits with listening devices and computers—and so there is no need to increase the level of surveillance being done.

In regards to the classification of information, the difference seems to be in the form of Othering that takes place in regards to the attackers. In the 9/11 attacks, the attackers were Arab, Muslim. They weren't from the United States. However, because of the internet, any publicly available information would be just as accessible to a Saudi citizen as to an American citizen, and as such, keeping secrets from the public as a whole makes sense. With the Battle of New

York, however, the invaders were alien. Even if there was a piece of information that every person on earth knew, the Chitauri—or any other possible alien invader—would not know it simply by virtue of not living on earth. This, in the public's eyes, lowers the motivation for keeping secrets, as the secrets could then only help the public be better prepared, and no possible invader could access them.

> **Skye:** *"They knew about the Battle of New York before it even happened. And then cleaned it up before anyone could ask any real questions-- overnight."[31]*

This also came with a feeling of betrayal by the public towards SHIELD. Even though SHIELD had no real way of knowing that an attack on that scale or in this location was coming, the public perceived them as having forewarning because they knew about aliens and as such the possibility of alien attack. More than that, because SHIELD hid this information from the public, the public was left unprepared; even though there was nothing they could have done to prevent the devastation even if they had known about the existence of aliens.

5.4 Change in Opinion

As in the real world, a number of characters in the MCU have a changing opinion as time passes. Skye's reversal from being against surveillance and classification to supporting it is one of the most striking examples within the franchise.

> **Skye:** *"SHIELD. Government. Scary men in dark suits who come after guys like you. They knew about the Battle of New York before it even happened. And then cleaned it up before anyone could ask any real questions—overnight."*

This rhetoric, which is being spoken to a man who was just revealed to have superpowers, mirrors standard anti-governmental rhetoric. The government is vague and exemplified by "scary men in dark suits"; to her, it doesn't matter what part of the government is after her because the government is simply one thing. After this is said, however, she joins the government, and more specifically, SHIELD, the organization that she argued against. Soon after this happens, she is still a strong believer in freedom of information, arguing that she should put information about the alien artifact they are dealing with online so that local people know what is going on. By episode three, however, she is defending "Big Brother" by positioning SHIELD as a benevolent protector rather than a faceless organization. This is the opposite of the transformation that happened after the Battle of New York, when the public demanded greater declassification. This positions SHIELD—and intelligence organizations with large-scale classification powers—as groups that the public will disagree with until they understand it better.

Skye's transition is different from what one might expect. In the real world, there is a feeling that once somebody becomes employed by an intelligence agency, especially a secretive one with widespread and unfettered powers, they become disillusioned; Edward Snowden is the quintessential example of this. Skye, contrary to this narrative, has been disillusioned following the Battle of New York—though her own personal belief that SHIELD holds details regarding to the parents she never met plays a role in these feelings—but becomes a believer in mass surveillance and classification of information only after her employment.

6 Conclusion

There are a few overall generalizations that can be made about the MCU and its discourse regarding surveillance and classification of information. SHIELD as an organization virtually invariably defends its own actions to the public, whether they be surveillance or classification of documents. As such, when a SHIELD agent speaks to a member of the public about one of these topics, the SHIELD agent defends the organization, its actions, or the issue in general. HYDRA and SHIELD, though mortal enemies, are presented as having essentially the same view point, differing only by the degree to which they are willing to go and the rhetoric they are willing to voice aloud. In the case of both surveillance and classification of information, protection and the related theme of national security are presented as the primary justifications for the actions.

It's difficult to say from a cursory view of Marvel or the MCU what their view on surveillance and classification of information are. Even after a comprehensive analysis of the MCU, there is no clear answer regarding Marvel's opinion

on classification of information. Coulson argues fairly comprehensively and persuasively against the internal classification of documents, while at the same time characters who were once vehemently against hiding information from the public change their minds. Overall, the opinion regarding that seems to be that information should be shared internally, but the public should be protected from what they can't handle.

The view on external surveillance, however, seems more clear-cut. External surveillance is necessary. There do not seem to be many disputes about this need in the franchise, with complaints about a lack of privacy and vague Big Brother rhetoric seeming superficial in comparison to the need to find international criminals or stop threats to national security.

6.1 Future Study

Given more time, a continuation of a study of Marvel's political discourses would yield further analysis. Though the major recent movies have been, for the most part, covered in this paper, an examination of the comics would be an interesting additional step. Specifically, it would be enlightening to look at the Marvel Civil War. In the comics, which ran from 2006 to 2007, the Civil War was an event that occurred in reaction to, among other things, the Superhuman Registration Act. While this may seem at first to be unrelated, registration is the logical extreme to increasing surveillance.

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