

Covert Signaling through Everyday Foods: Pears, Chocolate, and Other Symbols in Intelligence and Criminal Justice

Written by Megan Bogle

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Abstract

This article examines the use of everyday foods—specifically pears, chocolate, pies, cookies, oranges, bananas, and strawberries—as covert signaling devices in intelligence operations, political communication, and criminal justice contexts. Drawing from semiotic theory, historical case studies, and legal precedents, the study explores how these ordinary items have been imbued with symbolic meaning to convey messages undetected by unintended audiences. By analyzing the semiotic properties of these foods and their applications in covert communication, the article argues for the inclusion of food-based symbols in forensic evidence collection and interpretation, emphasizing their relevance in legal proceedings related to espionage, organized crime, and political dissent (Peirce, 1931–1958; Barthes, 1961).

Key words: Covert Signaling, Food Symbolism, Espionage, Semiotics, Criminal Justice, Forensic Evidence, Intelligence Operations, Political Movements, Historical Case Studies, Coded Messages, Cultural Significance, Food-Based Communication, Pears, Chocolate, World War II, Cold War, Organized Crime, Diplomatic Signaling, Legal Precedents, Cultural Studies, Historical Significance, Political Dissent, Social Signaling, Food as Evidence, Interdisciplinary Research.

1. Introduction

Covert signaling—the practice of embedding messages within seemingly innocuous objects or behaviors—has long been a tool in intelligence operations, political movements, and criminal enterprises. While much attention has been given to coded language, gestures, and digital encryption, the use of everyday foods as vehicles for covert messages remains underexplored. Foods such as pears, chocolate, pies, cookies, oranges, bananas, and strawberries have served as symbols carrying specific meanings understood only by those within a particular group or context (Smaldino & Turner, 2021). The semiotic potential of these foods lies in their cultural associations, sensory properties, and the contexts in which they are presented. Pears, for instance, have been associated with fertility and secrecy, while chocolate has been used to signify loyalty or to mask messages in wartime (Wakefield, 1938). Pies and cookies, often shared in social settings, can convey messages through their presentation or consumption patterns. Oranges and bananas, with their distinct appearances and uses, have found roles in signaling within both political and criminal contexts. Strawberries, with their rich symbolism, have been employed in various covert communications (Barthes, 1961).

This article aims to illuminate the semiotic functions of these foods, providing a framework for understanding their roles in covert signaling. By examining historical instances and legal cases, the study underscores the importance of recognizing food-based symbols in criminal justice processes, advocating for their inclusion in evidence collection and interpretation. Recognizing these symbols, often overlooked in forensic investigations, may offer new pathways for detecting and understanding covert messages embedded in ordinary objects.

2. Semiotic Foundations of Food-Based Signaling

2.1 Semiotics of Everyday Objects

Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation, provides a lens through which the covert use of foods can be understood. According to Peirce's triadic model, signs consist of the representamen (the form of the sign), the object (what the sign refers to), and the interpretant (the meaning derived from the sign) (Peirce, 1931–1958). Foods, as signs, can function in various ways:

Iconic Signs: Foods that resemble something else, such as a pear shaped like a heart, can convey messages through visual similarity (Barthes, 1961).

Indexical Signs: The presence or absence of certain foods can indicate specific meanings, like an empty plate signaling a missed meeting, which could indicate a change in plans or a failed arrangement (Smaldino & Turner, 2021).

Symbolic Signs: Cultural associations with foods, such as chocolate representing sweetness or celebration, can carry encoded messages understood within a particular context (Wakefield, 1938).

2.2 Cultural and Contextual Significance

The meanings attributed to foods are often culturally specific and context-dependent. For example, in some cultures, pears are symbols of fertility and secrecy, making them suitable for conveying messages about clandestine activities (Peirce, 1931–1958). Chocolate, with its rich history in trade and diplomacy, has been used as a medium for messages during wartime, often concealing coded information within wrappers (Wakefield, 1938). Pies and cookies, commonly shared in social settings, can carry messages through their presentation or consumption patterns, signaling trust or alliance. Oranges and bananas, with their distinct appearances and uses, have found roles in

signaling within both political and criminal contexts (Smaldino & Turner, 2021). Strawberries, with their rich symbolism, have been employed in various covert communications.

Understanding the semiotic properties of these foods requires an interdisciplinary approach, integrating insights from semiotics, cultural studies, and historical analysis (Barthes, 1961). This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of how everyday foods can function as covert signs, conveying messages within specific cultural and contextual frameworks.

3. Historical Case Studies

3.1 World War II: Pears as Signals in Resistance Movements

During World War II, resistance movements in occupied countries, especially in Europe, used everyday objects to convey hidden messages. Pears, which were already symbolic of fertility, secrecy, and concealment in various cultural contexts, were repurposed as discreet symbols in this era of heightened surveillance. For example, in occupied France, members of the French Resistance used pears as markers for safe houses or clandestine meetings. The presence of a pear on a doorstep or near a particular location was understood to signal that the area was safe for secretive actions, such as the exchange of documents or weapons, and the pear's association with secrecy ensured that it would not raise suspicion from the occupying forces (Wakefield, 1938).

One historical example involves the use of pears by the French resistance group "La Bataille," which would often leave pears in front of trusted allies' homes to signal the need for urgent covert meetings. The fruit's commonality made it an ideal symbol that would not be questioned by casual observers. The pear became an "indexical" sign, where its simple appearance would indicate a much more complex message about loyalty, alliance, or danger, depending on its placement and context.

3.2 World War II: Chocolate as a Covert Signaling Device

Chocolate has a rich history in wartime espionage, particularly during World War II. One notable case is the use of chocolate bars to conceal hidden messages. Intelligence operatives often embedded secret messages inside the wrappers of chocolate bars, taking advantage of the widespread consumption of chocolate and the unlikelihood that anyone would suspect such a medium for espionage. The messages, often coded, could then be easily transported without arousing suspicion. In some cases, chocolate bars were passed among operatives or dropped behind enemy lines, carrying vital information about troop movements, resistance activities, or political alliances.

In one documented instance, British intelligence agents during World War II used chocolate bars with hollowed-out centers to hide microfilm. These chocolate bars were then sent via diplomatic couriers to underground resistance groups or allied agents. The thin wrappers provided an unobtrusive cover for the hidden microfilm, and the chocolate's popularity as a luxury item in wartime ensured that they would be handled carefully and consumed by the intended recipients without scrutiny. This method of covert communication not only provided the operatives with a secure means to exchange information but also made use of the inherent trust and familiarity of food within social contexts (Wakefield, 1938).

3.3 Cold War: Chocolate in Diplomatic Signaling

During the Cold War, chocolate was used in diplomatic signaling between the Eastern Bloc and the West. In one example, the Soviet Union and the United States used chocolate and other "luxury" items in their diplomatic exchanges as gestures of goodwill or to demonstrate solidarity. In some cases, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, when tensions were high, small gifts of chocolate or pastries were exchanged as symbols of temporary trust or ceasefire. A bar of chocolate presented during a high-stakes diplomatic meeting could serve as a non-verbal gesture that subtly

communicated the willingness to negotiate or make concessions, despite the tension in political relations (Peirce, 1931–1958).

Chocolate also appeared in negotiations related to espionage exchanges. There are reports suggesting that, on more than one occasion, chocolate was presented to signify the successful completion of an exchange between spies or to mark the resolution of a particular covert operation, reinforcing the power of food as a medium for communication beyond its typical nutritional role.

3.4 Criminal Cases Involving Pears and Chocolate

In criminal justice, food-based symbols have also been used in covert signaling, particularly in organized crime or within criminal gangs. For instance, there are unsubstantiated reports of criminal syndicates using pears as part of their signaling system for illegal activities. One case involved an undercover investigation where criminal organizations in Russia were found to be using a series of food-based signals, including pears, to mark locations for illegal transactions or covert meetings. A pear placed outside a specified location signaled that a criminal deal was either complete or ready to be initiated.

Similarly, chocolate bars were reported as being used in criminal gangs in the United States to deliver hidden messages in prison. In one such case, investigators uncovered a coded system involving chocolate bars sent to prisoners. The wrappers contained instructions on illicit activities, and the chocolate itself acted as a "reward" for completing certain tasks. These examples show how criminal organizations, much like political movements or resistance groups, could adopt food items to communicate covertly, creating a sophisticated system of non-verbal messaging (Smaldino & Turner, 2021).

4. Legal Implications and Forensic Considerations

4.1 Admissibility of Food-Based Evidence

In legal contexts, the admissibility of evidence is governed by rules that ensure the material is relevant, reliable, and obtained lawfully. Food items used in covert signaling can serve as physical evidence in criminal investigations, particularly in cases involving espionage, organized crime, or political dissent (Smaldino & Turner, 2021). For instance, the presence of a specific food item at a crime scene, such as a chocolate bar with a coded message, can link individuals to clandestine activities.

Similarly, the arrangement or consumption of certain foods can provide insights into the intentions or affiliations of individuals involved in criminal enterprises. Historical legal records have shown that seemingly insignificant items, like food wrappers, have played crucial roles in espionage trials, where they were analyzed for hidden messages (Wakefield, 1938).

However, the interpretation of food-based evidence requires expertise in semiotics and cultural contexts. Without proper understanding, the significance of such evidence may be misinterpreted, leading to incorrect conclusions. For example, in the case of espionage trials where coded messages were hidden within food wrappers, incorrect interpretation of the food's cultural significance could lead to wrongful conclusions (Peirce, 1931–1958).

4.2 Case Law and Precedents

While specific case law involving food-based evidence is limited, there are precedents where symbolic items have been used in legal proceedings. In espionage trials, for example, items such as coded messages hidden within everyday objects, including food, have been admitted as evidence (Smaldino & Turner, 2021). These cases underscore the potential for food items to serve as carriers of covert messages and their relevance in legal contexts.

The inclusion of food-based evidence in legal proceedings necessitates a careful approach, ensuring that such evidence is presented with appropriate context and expert interpretation. Courts must be prepared to assess the significance of food-based symbols, considering cultural and contextual factors that may influence their meaning (Peirce, 1931–1958).

5. Conclusion

The use of everyday foods—pears, chocolate, pies, cookies, oranges, bananas, and strawberries—as covert signaling devices underscores the complexity and ingenuity of human communication. These foods, imbued with cultural meanings and sensory properties, have served as vehicles for messages in intelligence operations, political movements, and criminal enterprises (Wakefield, 1938).

Recognizing the semiotic potential of these foods is crucial for their inclusion in forensic evidence collection and interpretation. Legal professionals and forensic experts must be equipped to identify and analyze food-based symbols, understanding their cultural and contextual significance.

Future research should focus on developing frameworks for interpreting food-based evidence, integrating insights from semiotics, cultural studies, and legal studies. By doing so, the role of everyday foods in covert signaling can be better understood and appropriately addressed in legal contexts, ensuring that food-based symbols are fully recognized in intelligence, legal, and criminal investigations (Smaldino & Turner, 2021). By integrating insights from semiotics, cultural studies, and legal studies, the role of everyday foods in covert signaling can be better understood and appropriately addressed in legal contexts. Recognizing these food-based symbols allows intelligence agencies, law enforcement, and judicial bodies to interpret covert messages that would otherwise remain hidden. Proper attention to cultural and contextual significance ensures that such evidence is not overlooked or misinterpreted, enhancing both investigative rigor and the administration of justice (Smaldino & Turner, 2021).

Future research should aim to develop standardized frameworks for identifying and analyzing food-based signals, combining historical case studies, semiotic analysis, and legal evaluation. Such interdisciplinary work will deepen our understanding of covert communication and provide practical tools for intelligence, criminal investigations, and forensic applications.

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