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The Universe

How a Television Series Promotes the
War On Terror Discourse

Corinne Frauke Ludwig

Abstract

Television today is one of the most influential factors in everyday life and although it has seen propagandistic contents before there seems to be a new trend in U.S. television to let certain series promote particular political discourses. As a case example this study examines the Fox hit show *24* and analyses how it reflects and promotes the *war on terror* discourse. Using that term as a collective name for discourses on terrorism, national security, self-defense, civil liberty and human rights, and their alteration and radicalization in the aftermath of 9/11, key aspects of the *war on terror* discourse are singled out and then located in the texture of the series, showing that there indeed is a strong overlap between the “lessons of 9/11” and the lessons of *24*, in other words between the way terrorism, threats, enemies and response strategies (the “new thinking”) are depicted in real life and in the series. The study then also offers some evidence and support for its underlying assumption that producers and powers behind the show intentionally promote political contents, out of ideological convictions and economic deliberations.

Key Words: Television, War On Terror, Response Strategy, Propaganda, 9/11

Characters: 66,828

Table of Content

1 Introduction.....	4
1.1 Subject of the Study	4
1.2 Purpose of the Study	5
1.3 Method and Material.....	5
1.4 Delimitations.....	5
2 The <i>War On Terror</i> Discourse	6
2.1 Fear and Its Ramifications	6
2.2 New Enemies	7
2.3 New Threats	7
2.4 New Thinking	8
3 The 24 Universe.....	10
3.1 The Concept of the Show.....	10
3.2 Maintaining Fear.....	11
3.3 Typifying the New Enemies	12
3.4 Depicting the New Threats	15
3.5 Advocating the New Thinking.....	16
4 Politics in the Media.....	22
4.1 The Propaganda model	22
4.2 The Hollywood-Pentagon connection.....	22
4.3 Fox Television Network	23
5 Conclusion	25
References.....	27

1 Introduction

1.1 Subject of the Study

Ever since 9/11 the public discourse in the United States has been dominated by the so called *war on terror*. Discourses of national security, terrorism, self-defense, civil liberty and human rights have been overshadowed by the threat of international terrorism, which has led to an alteration and radicalization of those discourses because “new threats”, in President Bush’s words, “require new thinking” (2002). New thinking on part of policy-makers who have passed new laws and approved new practices in order to provide and guarantee national security, but also on part of the American people because in a democracy the electorate has to approve of their government’s actions. Accordingly, policy-makers and those benefiting from the current climate have a natural interest in influencing the electorate’s ‘thinking’ and thereby securing the necessary support for their doings. What better way to do so than to employ both entertainment and news industry?

That politicians and governments use the news media to promote their means and ends is not a new phenomenon and there is also a longstanding tradition to let the film studios in Hollywood boost support for US troops and goals. But in recent years the channel that combines news and entertainment in a blurry symbiosis has rapidly caught up in terms of propagating politics. And it can hardly come as a surprise: that television, today, is one of the most influential factors in everyday life is hard to dismiss. It is therefore only logical that a medium that has the potential to reach every sector and member of the society, plus a good many people in the rest of the world, has now become part of the political toolbox way beyond just the sphere of news, press conferences and election commercials.

Since 2001 a lot of drama or action series on US television have in some way picked up on 9/11 or the threat of international terrorism and be it just by proxy. But there’s also a range of shows that don’t just incidentally touch upon the subject but whose main fabric is made of the “new threat” and the “new thinking”. Whether it is *J.A.G.*, a high-color, one-hour commercial for the military and in recent years mainly for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, it’s companion piece *The Agency*, portraying brave CIA agents in their struggle to serve and protect their country, or the newest member of the genre *Commander In Chief*, playing with the scenario of a female president in the White House in times of crisis, these shows all promote specific political discourses by blurring the lines between reality and fiction.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The most controversial representative of this genre is the FOX Network series *24*, portraying agents of a fictitious counter terrorist unit as they are fighting the clock to avert multiple attacks on American soil. It serves as case example for this study and is analyzed in order to show how political means and ends are promoted in the aftermath of 9/11 and how new conceptions of what's necessary and what's acceptable in the *war on terror* are consolidated in public opinion. The leading question this study tries to answer is thus

- how *24* reflects and promotes vital aspects of the *war on terror* discourse.

1.3 Method and Material

In a first step, key facets of the *war on terror* discourse are identified and summarized which provides a more structured understanding of the term and a way of organizing the main features of the series in the actual analysis. Subsequently, the study draws on a theoretical model and recent research on media and propaganda when establishing support for its underlying assumption that there is an interest- and ideology-based intention on part of the producers behind the show to promote the *war on terror* discourse.

The main source of the study is the television program itself. As most series it is produced in seasons and since the show's initiation in 2001 there have been five. The primary material comprises thus 120 episodes which equals about 86 hours of footage (without commercial breaks). Additionally, the study draws on primary and secondary sources from different fields of research, from official documents and press releases, and from journalistic field work.

1.4 Delimitations

By selecting single aspects of the discourse and the program, the study contains a high degree of subjectivity. Since most forms of discourse, content, and qualitative analyses however naturally go hand in hand with large extents of interpretation, and since interpretations can't be anything but subjective, the approach is still robust.

The extensive amount of primary material would also tempt to include quantitative methods into the study but those were dismissed in favor of a purely qualitative approach because it seemed better suited to capture the obvious as well as the more subtle ways and means of promoting the *war on terror* discourse.

Finally, with regard to its purpose and method the study argues that the show intentionally and purposefully promotes a certain political discourse. It can however not come to any conclusions about the program's actual impacts on its audiences and viewers. It might be a starting point for research going forward though.

2 The *War On Terror* Discourse

In general terms, the *war on terror* discourse can be described as a combination of discourses on national security and defense, foreign and domestic policies and politics, terrorism and enemy images, religion and culture, and civil liberty and human rights. Throughout this study, the term stands more specifically as a collective name for the alteration and radicalization of said discourses in the aftermath of 9/11. The following subchapters identify and summarize those aspects of the discourse that appeared to be most relevant to the analysis.

2.1 Fear and Its Ramifications

The lesson of September 11th is clear: new dangers can arrive on our shores without warning (Bush 2005).

The most immediate and probably the most persistent reaction to 9/11, besides grief and anger, was wide-spread fear, exacerbated by the exhaustive media coverage and the rhetoric of fear used by government officials (Grupp 2003). This “culture of fear” in which Americans expected “a new attack around every corner” (Bristow 2003) and believed that “the nation would be fortunate to get through the next three months without a similar or more serious blow being struck” (Gaddis 2005:3) led in turn to two other immediate and apparently no less persistent reactions: the unity of the population in the face of an external threat, and the demand for a strong leadership in the face of a crisis (Grupp 2003:51). Both played a significant role and in fact facilitated another consequence of 9/11: the tightening of legislation. As polling data collected by ABC and published in 2003 indicates there was a broad support among Americans for such measures even if it meant infringements on civil rights (Spence 2005:294; cp. also The Canada Institute 2005). Stating that “a mass mediated discourse of fear impacts public opinion in such a way that it allows policy-makers to enact legislation that would have been thought inappropriate” otherwise (Grupp 2003:11), Grupp argues that the post 9/11 media coverage helped the Bush administration to maintain a level of fear that allowed them to launch legislative processes which effectively expanded governmental power (2003:56ff). As Bowman points out, living with the fear of becoming a victim of terrorism has become “the new normal” for Americans and although the absence of new attacks on American soil has somewhat decreased this fear, terrorism remains a top threat to national security and a majority of Americans continue to believe that government actions taken since 9/11 have been and continue to be both necessary to and effective in making the nation safer (The Canada Institute 2005:4ff).

2.2 New Enemies

The lesson of September 11th is clear: new dangers can arrive on our shores without warning. In this era of surprise, we cannot know for certain who might attack us, or where, or when (Bush 2005).

Although Al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden were pointed at as the ones responsible for the 9/11 attacks almost immediately, and although “turbaned clerics” and sword-swinging Jihadists are still at the heart of the enemy image propagated by the Bush administration, that image never entirely left the realm of vagueness (Phar 2003). Even the famous “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists”-announcement (Bush 2001) and its implications apart, there has always been a certain generosity to defining who exactly the enemy in the *war on terror* is. As Pipes points out, “in the weeks after September 11, whenever [...] Bush referred to enemies, he insisted they were neither Afghans nor even Muslims but rather people he called ‘evildoers’ or ‘the evil ones’”. This in order not to offend anyone (2002) and due to his religiously inspired rhetoric as much as for strategic and political reasons because a faceless enemy is much more convenient in several regards. Firstly, an invisible adversary spread out all over the globe justifies that he’d be hunted down and taken out “by all means necessary”. Secondly, “a faceless enemy is in effect devoid of combatant status”. Thirdly, US allies with domestic ‘terror’ problems on their hands can class their oppressive actions against opposition or anti-government groups as part of the war on terror as well now (Phar 2003). Accordingly, although America was initially at war with “terrorists [practicing] a fringe form of Islamic extremism” and “every government that supports them” (Bush 2001), the war soon included “unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction” and “evil and lawless regimes” in general (Bush 2002). The defining characteristic of the enemy seems then that he is “brutal and determined” and “will not be stopped by negotiations, or concessions, or appeals to reason” (Bush 2005). He is, in other words, “faceless when [he] needs to be, but when a label or identity suits the current purposes of government, one is quickly found” (Phar 2003).

2.3 New Threats

The lesson of September 11th is clear: new dangers can arrive on our shores without warning. In this era of surprise, we cannot know for certain who might attack us, or where, or when. But we can anticipate how we might be attacked (Bush 2005).

Although terrorism—even in its most recent, so called international or global version and with all its ramifications—was a well—known phenomenon long before 2001, the September 11 attacks were the tipping point that catapulted terrorism to the forefront of political agendas and public assessment (The Canada Institute 2005:1). Government officials, in statements to the press and public announcements, repeatedly emphasized the new threat and how it had “prompted their departments to propose new strategies for combating terrorism” (Dao 2001).

One of the first concerns was for possible targets of further aerial strikes and their security, especially nuclear facilities (National Control Institute 2001).

Scenarios for nuclear terrorism went on to encompass nuclear waste theft, “dirty bombs”, the diversion of nuclear material or weapons in countries with low security or control levels, or the attack of nuclear facilities with conventional weaponry in order to cause the meltdown of a reactor core (cp. Berry 2001; Blair 2001; Medalia 2004). With “more than 28,000 nuclear devices in existence today, more and more countries [...] acquiring the means to produce them, and [...] mounting evidence that al Qaeda has every intention of using a nuclear weapon if only it can get its hands on one” nuclear terrorism has been identified as and remains an acute risk in the eyes of many (Wolfsthal 2005:156).

Another major concern was and is the fear of attacks with biological or chemical weapons, certainly elevated by the anthrax attacks in 2001 and the fact that the terror cell behind 9/11 had previously considered the possibility of using crop-duster aircraft to disperse biological or chemical agents (Parachini 2001:1). In his federal budget for 2003, President Bush asked for an increase in funding for research and development on biological warfare by 300 percent (The White House 2002) and between 2002 and 2004 the funding for first responder and public health terrorism preparedness has seen an increase of 900 percent. Coordinated by the Department of Homeland Security there have also been numerous initiatives and programs throughout the country to empower the general population to prepare for and respond to potential terrorist attacks (Department of Homeland Security 2004).

2.4 New Thinking

The lesson of September 11th is clear: new dangers can arrive on our shores without warning. In this era of surprise, we cannot know for certain who might attack us, or where, or when. But we can anticipate how we might be attacked, and we can transform our capabilities to defend our citizens and deliver justice to our enemies (Bush 2005).

A key word in the Bush administration’s general response strategy to the “new dangers” is pre-emption. Dating back to the Cold War era, pre-emption, in its original sense, meant “taking military action against a state that [is] about to launch an attack; international law and practice had long allowed such actions to forestall clear and immediately present dangers.” Arguing that the nation’s security would be at risk if the United States were to wait until a terrorist threat was clear and present, the Bush administration expanded the concept of pre-emption and in its post-9/11 meaning it now includes military actions against a state “that might, at some future point, pose such risks” (Gaddis 2005:4). The United States thereby effectively reserve the right to ignore and violate the principle of national sovereignty at lib (Spence 2005:289), or to use the metaphor offered by Ikenberry, assigns itself the role of “a global policeman who reports to no higher authority and no longer allows locks on citizen’s doors” (Gaddis 2005:5), or to use yet another image, to shoot first and ask questions later because while “pre-emption gives up the certainty that we are in fact being attacked” it guarantees “that we will continue to exist” (United States Naval Academy, n.d.).

As Grupp argues the “discourse of fear” in the aftermath of 9/11 “now affects domestic policy where it used to affect foreign policy” (2003:49) and Spence agrees that the installation of Homeland Security¹ led to a “domestication” of pre-emptive patterns (2005:293). In other words, concepts and practices of pre-emption are no longer elements of foreign politics alone; the *shoot first mentality*, as part of the “new thinking”, has found its way into domestic law enforcement as well.

As President Bush announced in his address to the nation in September 2001, law enforcement would be given “the additional tools it needs to track down terror here at home” (Bush 2001). The subsequent new legislation, namely the *Patriot Act* and the *Homeland Security Act*, then expanded law enforcement authorities but also “unduly compromise[d] civil liberties and protections” (Jones and Howard-Hassmann 2005:61). By revising surveillance laws, the *Patriot Act* allowed the government to “spy on its own citizens, while simultaneously reducing checks and balances on those powers like judicial oversight, public accountability, and the ability to challenge government searches in court” (American Civil Liberties Union 2003). There has thus not only been an increase in human rights violations abroad, in official or secret detention camps and holding facilities on Cuba, in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, but even infringements on civil liberty rights “here at home” (cp. American Civil Liberties Union 2003; Amnesty International Report 2005; Hooks and Mosher 2005; Jones and Howard-Hassmann 2005).

Another component going hand in hand with pre-emption is the committed readiness to unilateralism and the disregard for international laws and organizations concerned with it (Jones and Howard-Hassmann 2005:61). As Hooks and Mosher point out, “the Bush administration is unique for formally embracing [the] abuse [of prisoners] and for conferring on the president the authority to set aside the Geneva Convention if he sees fit.” Although abuses like the ones in the famous Abu-Ghraib prison in Iraq were officially explained with the misconduct of individuals and failures in the chain of command, orders and authorizations given by senior U.S. officials including the Secretary of Defense (cp. Washington Post 2004) confirm that there’s in fact a “highly rationalized system of interrogation” at work that “places a higher value on information extraction than it does on human rights” (Hooks and Mosher 2005:1628). Accordingly, President Bush was advised that since the war on terror was a new kind of war limitations under the Geneva act were rendered obsolete, and in August 2002 the Department of Justice “declared that the administration was exempt even from U.S. laws against torture”. The President’s abilities to detain or interrogate enemies should not be regulated because torture “may be justified” and “international laws against it “unconstitutional” (Hooks and Mosher 2005:1634).

¹ Established in November 2002 by the *Homeland Security Act*, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) combines and coordinates the efforts of 22 intelligence agencies in protection of the territory of the United States from terrorist attacks, effectively broadening the agencies’ powers to monitor citizens. (cp. Wikipedia 2006a)

3 The 24 Universe

3.1 The Concept of the Show

One of the main factors behind the success of *24* is its groundbreaking format. Following in the footsteps of the Hollywood classic *High Noon*, the series is set in a real time frame where a ticking clock is the constant reminder of time's inevitable progress². In this concept, each of the one hour-long episodes renders exactly one hour of the story line. Even when the show goes off to commercials there's no real break for the characters which supposedly keep doing what they were just busy doing. When the program returns, the story then picks up several minutes from where it stopped before the break. To help the viewers keeping track, a digital clock with the seconds clicking away is faded in before and after every break, from time to time throughout and always at the beginning and end of each episode. Comprising twenty-four episodes altogether, each season of the series takes place in the course of one day. Between seasons (or days) is however a supposed time gap of several months or years.

Another reason for the show's success is its thematic texture, combining good old-fashioned good vs. evil, hero vs. villain, law enforcement vs. crime elements with current day terrorism scenarios and political decision-making in the face thereof. Each season usually ties together four story lines viewing the events of the day from different angles.

The prime story line is centered around main character Jack Bauer, a federal agent working for the L.A. branch of a secret intelligence service called CTU (Counter Terrorist Unit). As the country is confronted with the imminent threat of a major terrorist attack as well as a series of related incidents prior to it, the main story line follows Bauer in his struggle to avert the attacks. Since those are usually scheduled to occur "within the hour" or "by the end of the day", the result is a nerve-wrecking fight against the clock.

A second story line is set on the governmental level and follows the president and his advisors as they tackle the challenges of the day and struggle with each other and their consciences in order to make the "right calls" for the greater good of the country. A third story line usually follows the terrorists as they plan and carry out their attacks and although good eventually always prevails some of the attacks actually succeed. A fourth story line, then, stays with the other agents and operatives at CTU headquarters where information and updates on the

² A Western shot in 1952, *High Noon* is the story of a local Marshall who stands up alone to face a superior enemy and protect the town that abandoned him in order to fulfill his duty. With the opening scene set at 10.20 and the villain due to arrive with the 12 o'clock train, the movie's 85 minutes roughly correspond to the story's actual timeframe. Shots of a clock symbolically ticking away the minutes to the final showdown is a central element.

progress of all four story lines come together and interact. Another gimmick that heightens the show's (visual) attractiveness is here the so called *split-screen technique* where the screen is divided into smaller "boxes" and for a moment shows elements of two or more story lines simultaneously before zooming in on one of them again.

3.2 Maintaining Fear

The main attraction of *24*, of course, stems from its high and constant level of action and adrenaline. Whether it's about getting to a certain location before a suspect leaves or arrives, gathering or extracting information before an attack occurs or can be set into motion, convincing someone that a specific action needs to be undertaken before it's too late even if that means to go against orders or the law, or rescuing someone literally last minute, there's always the time limit to everything, always the thrill of fighting the clock. Thanks to the different angles in the various story lines there's also room for moral debates and dilemmas, emotional turmoil and political bargaining as well as good old shoot and run action. Suspense and suspicion are kept at a steady pace because even though it seems clear who's a terrorist and who's a federal agent, presidential advisor or innocent civilian, no one can be trusted and anyone can do anything at any moment. That's one of the major lessons *24* teaches its audience again and again with each new season. Turncoat agents betray their country, high-ranking politicians knowingly play into the hands of terrorists to raise funding or attention, and families who seem like your perfect next door neighbors turn out to harbor or in fact be extremists. Terrorists and their companions slip in and out of the country and plan their evil doings from all around the globe to then strike on American soil. Every scenario is possible, every enemy is imaginable, and danger is looming and lurking everywhere causing the heroes to cross the lines of what used to be acceptable for law enforcement agents in order to in the show's own jargon "get the job done". With terrorist attacks never being much further than one step away and being as unpredictable as inconceivable to the normal citizen, the best one can do is to rely on the good guys in government and law enforcement to do the right thing at the right time.

In the earlier mentioned "culture of fear" these lessons—that fear is reasonable, that the threat of terrorism is as constant as it is imminent, that all means are justified under the circumstances and that faith in the competence of government and law enforcement is indispensable—notably overlap with "the lesson of September 11th" (Bush 2005, cp. section 2). In a world before or short of the 9/11 attacks, the show might have been just any television series or seemed out of place and plain ridiculous. But in a world with domestic terror alerts bouncing up and down on a color scale, weaponized anthrax from high-security government facilities being mailed by unknown perpetrators, US citizens being kidnapped and executed in front of a camera, human rights under the Geneva Act being declared obsolete, redefined "enemy combatants" and torture scandals, *Homeland Security* and *Patriot* acts, *24* doesn't seem so far off reality or people's perception of reality anymore.

3.3 Typifying the New Enemies

When the first episodes of the show's fourth season aired in early 2005, criticism mounted over the plotline of an Arab family being revealed as an undetected sleeper cell. Seeming like your picture-perfect neighbors in a wealthy Los Angeles suburb, the entire family is in fact deeply involved in the terrorist activities of that day. In order to maintain their cover, "the stay-at-home terrorist mom" in cold blood shoots the American girlfriend of her teenage son before she, "with the body [still] lying in her living room, [...] calmly answers the door of her comfortable suburban home and tells the girl's concerned mother what [a] wonderful daughter she has". Protests that this portraying of a "seemingly normal [Muslim] family as a nest of terrorist operatives" would cast general suspicion on immigrant families in the US and further anti-Muslim sentiments prompted the producers to broadcast a statement that assured viewers that "the American-Muslim community stands firmly beside their fellow Americans in denouncing and resisting terrorism".³

It is debatable whether or not this statement-issued not by the "American-Muslim community" but by "their fellow Americans" at Fox Television-did anything to counter or balance the potential discrimination and stereotyping of Muslims or if it, as some argue, in fact contained "a not-so-subtle message [to] all those who oppose the action of US police agencies in the war on terror [that they] are themselves legitimate targets for political repression" (Watson 2005). Addressing the criticism against the story line, co-writer and producer Robert Cochran however declared that it is the show's intention to tell "stories that are grounded in reality", and that while "the vast, overwhelming majority of Muslim-Americans [were] law-abiding U.S. citizens like everyone else", "terrorist acts by extremist Muslim groups" were part of that reality (CAIR 2005). Iran-born actress Shohreh Aghdashloo follows in the same line of argument when defending her decision to play the part of Dina Araz, the coldblooded terrorist family mother who later in the show is torn between the love for her cause and the love for her son.

"24 is not representative of Arab or Muslim families," she explains. "This show is not a portrayal of Muslims. It's a portrayal of terrorists who claim to be Muslims. [...] We live in the post 9/11 era. 24 has intelligent writers who are responsible artists that have been inspired by the events of the day." (Juba 2005)

Despite this controversy it should be noted that this was the only one of the series' so far five seasons that featured Muslim terrorists as the masterminds behind the attacks of the day. Previously, the first half of the series' second season, broadcasted in 2002/2003, had been centered around a group of Islamic extremists trying to detonate a nuclear device on American soil, but as later

³ Broadcasted as opener for the following week's episode the statement delivered by actor Kiefer Sutherland, who plays main character Jack Bauer on the show, read: "I'm Kiefer Sutherland. I play counter-terrorist agent Jack Bauer on Fox's 24. While terrorism is obviously one of the most critical challenges facing our nation and the world, it's important to recognize that the American Muslim community stands firmly beside their fellow Americans in denouncing and resisting terrorism in every form."

episodes revealed the group was in fact being used by domestic terrorists and conspirators inside the US government for their own purposes and thus only played a minor role in the greater picture. Furthermore, both the second and the fourth season also featured non-terrorist Muslim characters who were introduced in a way so that they would seem suspicious to the audience at first but later turn out to be just as law-abiding, decent, and patriotic as their fellow American citizens.

It appears thus that rather than promoting one specific enemy image the show sticks to the concept of an enemy who is “faceless when [he] needs to be” but quickly identified “when a label or identity suits the current purposes” (Phar 2003, cp. section 2.2). In other words, rather than settling for one ultimate villain, the show seems to pick up on the political climate and public opinion as it moves from season to season. After all, most important for a television series is that the villain is “brutal and determined” (cp. section 2.2).

In the third season, for example, the mastermind behind the day’s terror plot is a former British intelligence agent holding a grudge over being abandoned and left for dead in a covert mission led by American intelligence. Asked what it is he wants, the villain declares:

to make America clean again. You see, Mr. President, the world hates America, and for good reason. I won’t bother going into the details. You know better than I the atrocities your nation commits. But we’re going to change all that. You and I, together, are going to dismantle the military machine that exports its ugliness across the globe.⁴

At another occasion he states that “the greatest threat to world peace comes from this country” and that America must therefore “be forced to retreat within its own borders.” When asked by the hero if the 800 people dead or dying because of him were a threat to his world peace, he replies that they “are simply the first casualties of war”.⁵ Aired in 2003/2004, the season’s production and broadcasting period coincided with the rise or increase of protests and anti-American sentiments all around the world in the wake of the U.S. led invasion of Iraq. Portraying the anti-American villain as a psychotic madman willing to kill millions of innocent civilians certainly is an effective way of delegitimizing anti-Americanism. Throughout the season it is however also strongly indicated that his ‘criticism’ of U.S. foreign policies is just a pretext masking his desire for vengeance after being left behind in said mission and as a consequence being incarcerated and tortured by the Serbian police for two years.

Evolving around a Mexican-based drug cartel that is expanding business and now involved in a auction bidding for a deadly virus, one plotline of the same season also reacted to—or interacted with—increasing concerns over (Mexican) border security and the growing nexus of terrorism and organized crime. Pre-9/11 plans to ease migration restrictions along the U.S.-Mexican border were quashed after the attacks and security tightened in order to stop terrorists from slipping into the country. Heavy investments brought a \$400 million budget increase for border protection in the fiscal year 2002/2003, accumulating to a \$9 billion budget for 2003/2004 (Associated Press 2003). This development was paralleled

⁴ Cp. 24, Season 3, episode 7 a.m. to 8 a.m.

⁵ Cp. 24, Season 3, episode 11 a.m. to 12 a.m.

by a side-effect of the war on terror. As Thomas M. Sanderson, Deputy Director at CSIS⁶, wrote in 2004, the past years and months had seen terrorist groups “moving deeper into organized criminal activity” due to the cut-off of financial support in the course of “the global war on terror”.

While there is some debate as to whether these groups are “converging” or “transforming”, it is clear that this growing threat is complex and increasingly difficult to counter with standard law enforcement and military counter-measures. [The] merging of transnational organized crime and international terrorism is [...] on the rise. [...] The year 2004 will be a period of great transition for the many players involved in this discussion. (Sanderson 2004:49)

Once again, Season 3 aired in 2003/2004, and even the very first scene of the following year’s fourth season showed a terrorist illegally crossing the U.S.-Mexican border in the middle of the night.

The final episodes of Season 4 also featured a ‘diplomatic’ clash with China over the extradition of a terror suspect who, being Chinese himself, seeks and is granted asylum in the Chinese embassy. Since there’s hardly any time for diplomacy and since the efforts made aren’t giving any results anyway, the suspect is ultimately being kidnapped in a covert operation. Leaving the ambassador being caught in the crossfire between U.S. agents and Chinese security officers and accidentally revealing one of the agents’ identity, the operation doesn’t go as smoothly as planned and threatens to have serious consequences and political ramifications. By the end of the season the Chinese government however settles for an official denial by the White House to have authorized the operation and an unofficial reassurance that the agent in charge has been killed (by another government agent acting on orders from someone in the White House). It’s a television series after all.

However, leaving this somewhat odd conclusion aside, the plotline around tense relations between the United States and China is at least interesting in the face of “the dramatic increase in China’s global economic power, its increasing regional influence, its growing military capabilities and the complex dynamics of its internal transformation” all of which in recent years has constituted “sources of increasing concern to the U.S. policy community and public (China Balance Sheet 2006). That diplomacy is dismissed as a time-consuming and ineffective means can’t surprise either since the enemy in the *war on terror* “will not be stopped by negotiations, or concessions, or appeals to reason”. Following the “either you’re with us or against us”-logic, a country granting asylum to and harboring a terror suspect constitutes a legitimate enemy (cp. section 2.2).

Most of the latest, fifth season then evolves around a group of Russian separatists hijacking a cargo of nerve gas canisters in the United States and trying to smuggle them out of the country to use them for attacks at home. As their plans get foiled by U.S. intelligence they decide to launch a major attack on American soil instead where, conveniently enough, the Russian president is just stopping by to sign a treaty and celebrate the beginning of a new friendship between former adversaries. In the face of Russia’s own ‘anti-terror campaign’ in Chechnya and

⁶ CSIS is the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Headquartered in Washington D.C., the non-profit organization “serves as a strategic planning partner for the government by conducting research and analysis and developing policy initiatives that look into the future and anticipate change”. (<http://www.csis.org/about/>)

the United States' growing understanding for the situation after 9/11 (cp. Williams 2004) this makes for another interesting concurrence.

3.4 Depicting the New Threats

Although the show's first season aired in 2001/2002 this timely proximity was, at least with regard to the storyline, coincidental. Written partly prior to the attacks, the script clearly hadn't absorbed the new post 9/11 situation yet. The basic plot was a war criminal from Kosovo seeking revenge on the two men responsible for a failed assassination attempt on his life that had killed his family instead. Kidnapping the main character's wife and daughter he tries to coerce the federal agent (who had carried out the failed mission) into assisting in the assassination of a U.S. senator and presidential candidate (who had authorized the mission). In the complete absence of international terrorism this first season was thus more about personal revenge and the struggle of one man between saving his family and serving his country.

In the following season, however, first aired in 2002/2003, a nuclear device gets smuggled into the country and is being detonated by a group of Muslim extremists. Luckily, Los Angeles' Counter Terrorist Unit finds the device in time and in a last minute safe flies it out of the city to let it explode in the Mojave desert. (Miraculously enough, the blast doesn't do much harm to anyone and is hardly ever mentioned again.)

In Season 3, terrorists threaten to release a deadly virus into the general public. Although the worst-case scenario is averted, one story line follows the events at an L.A. hotel where the substance is released into the ventilation system and contaminates the entire building holding 800 people at the time. Considering the earlier mentioned efforts by the U.S. government and the Department of Homeland Security to prepare the American public for potential acts of biological terrorism and the dramatic increase in funding between 2002 and 2004 (cp. section 2.3) the season, first aired in 2003/2004, certainly did its stint. Firstly, because graphic images of the biological attack and its consequences, of the pathology of the virus and of a painful and atrocious death were—in the context of a very real perceived threat of the same sort—bound to appear much less fictional. Secondly, because it made a convincing argument that intelligence services and law enforcement should indeed be allowed to resort to all and any means necessary to prevent such an attack. And thirdly, because it played out a drastic scenario the general public better had to be prepared for. In one scene, for example, one of the hotel guests attempts to leave the containment area that is set up around the building. A federal agent warns him that he cannot be allowed to leave and when the unarmed man tries to run shoots him in the back. Later on, with casualties rising and nothing that could be done for those already infected, so called "suicide capsules" are offered to those who want to minimize their suffering in an act of mercy and to give "an alternative" to an "extremely painful" death "in agony".⁷

⁷ Cp. 24, Season 3, episode 6 a.m. to 7 a.m.

2005's season features the return of nuclear terrorism when the first 12 episodes evolve around terrorists stealing a fictional device (called "override") that can be used to manipulate nuclear reactors all over the country to cause a meltdown of their cores. Although CTU manages to retrieve the device, one reactor actually melts down and the surrounding area has to be evacuated. (Again, there's no mention of longtime radiation damage to anyone or even the area close to or around Los Angeles in later seasons.)

In the second half of the season the same terrorists then manage to shoot down Air Force One and steal the *nuclear football*⁸, a briefcase containing the launch codes for the country's nuclear arsenal. With a nuclear warhead in their hands as well, they finally try to launch a nuclear air strike on Los Angeles.

Season 5 turned to chemical terrorism and featured several in fact successful attacks with a fictional nerve gas called *Sentox*.

3.5 Advocating the New Thinking

In the first episode of the series' second season, the main character has to infiltrate a group of domestic terrorists that is the only lead in the investigation about the nuclear attack scheduled to happen that day. Seeing only one way to regain the trust of the group's leader, the federal agent has a former associate of the group, who's now willing to testify for the prosecution, brought to CTU headquarters. After establishing that said witness is a child-pornographer and murderer he shoots him in the heart at point-blank range before asking for a hacksaw. In the following episode he shows up at the terrorists' hideout to literally serve the head of the potential witness to the group's leader, just not on a platter but in a sports bag. When confronted by his superior officer he justifies his action.

You wanna find this bomb? Because that's what it's gonna take. [...] That's the problem with people like you, George. You wanna get results but you never want to get your hands dirty. I'd start rolling up your sleeves.⁹

Desperate times call for desperate measures and new threats require new thinking. There can hardly be any television show, film or movie that is advocating this more determinedly or strongly than *24*. And over the last four seasons the leeway for what is necessary and what is tolerable under the threat of an imminent attack has expanded constantly.

At another occasion in Season 2, a captured terrorist refuses to give up the location of said nuclear bomb even when the main character tortures and threatens to kill him. Knowing that "his family is his only vulnerability", the hero has the man's wife and sons arrested by security forces in their home land and threatens to have them killed one by one unless he gets the information he needs. Having to

⁸ A briefcase containing the nuclear launch codes and the nuclear playbook regulating under which circumstances which weapons are to be used if the President was to authorize a nuclear strike, the *football* is never more than a few steps away from the President when he leaves the White House (GlobalSecurity.org 2006)

⁹ Cp. *24*, Season 2, episode 8 a.m. to 9 a.m.

decide whether to authorize the agent's actions or not, the President and his Chief of Staff have a debate behind closed doors.

- President: Can we let this happen? Condone the murder of innocent people?
CoS: Your argument would be that the bomb is an act of war and wars inevitably result in civilian casualties.
President: [...] I don't know of a war where a President knowingly targeted children for assassination.
CoS: Compare this to a weapon's factory we discover is near to a hospital, a situation we have faced. A bombing would still be ordered on the logic that many more people would be saved by the destruction of the factory. The numbers are even more compelling here. A few people might have to die to save millions.

Later on, the federal agent himself offers another argument when trying to get the President's OK.

Sir, the action would take place in his [the terrorist's] country. You would not be involved. It would be a field decision.

In the end, however, the President decides not to authorize "the action", forcing the hero to settle for an alternative and just pretend to have one of the terrorist's sons shot to break the man.¹⁰

At the same time, the President is conducting his own investigation on the side against the Chief of the NSA¹¹ who's believed to be the head of a conspiracy responsible for intentionally letting the nuclear device fall into the hands of the terrorists. Although the President is hesitant at first, he orders an agent with "special training" to "extract information" from the NSA Chief. Asked by the agent how far he is permitted to go, the President tells him to do whatever he has to do.¹²

However shocking and crossing the line of what's tolerable these actions seem, compared to later seasons this second year of the show was just the beginning and still relatively harmless. Firstly, the 'victims' of acts of torture and violence are never innocent but either convicted criminals, murderous terrorists or ruthless traitors. Secondly, most of the "dirty work" is either done by the main character himself, a man who's lost everything that meant something to him except for his work and who's now willing to go at any length and cross any border to "get the job done", or by foreigners, like for example in the season's opening scene. While the viewer gets to witness how a man is brutally tortured by South Korean intelligence, American operatives are merely waiting in a room next door without being actively involved. In the earlier mentioned scene with the captured terrorist it is foreign security forces in his (unnamed) home country, hooded and armed, who are holding his family hostage and are prepared to do the actual killing. Thirdly, there's at least a considerable amount of debate and some resistance before torture is authorized as a last resort and most importantly as an exception and a deviation from protocol and regulations.

In the following year's third season, torture is already less of an outstanding event. The techniques used are more sophisticated, the act itself has become

¹⁰ Cp. 24, Season 2, episode 7 p.m. to 8 p.m.

¹¹ NSA is the abbreviation for *National Security Agency*, one of the United States most powerful and most secret intelligence services.

¹² Cp. 24, Season 2, episode 6 p.m. to 7 p.m.

somewhat of a routine procedure, and the locations are no longer just basement rooms and remote hideouts. CTU for example has a special agent who's brought in on interrogations to make suspected or known terrorists cooperate by injecting them with a pain-inflicting drug. In Season 4, one suspect is being subjected to what's called "sensory disorientation" on the show, a technique where the suspect's sight is cut off and his auditory saturated. As the agent in charge assures his superior it is "non-invasive".¹³ *Sensory deprivation* is a very real technique used to deprive victims of any sensory orientation. They can't see, hear, feel, or taste. It became known to the wider public in 2002 when photographs from the infamous Guantanamo Bay prison camp showing "shackled captives, their eyes blacked out behind no-see goggles, their ears and noses tightly muffled as they were made to kneel before their captors" in orange prison garbs were published around the world and "rightly caused international outrage" (Warigi 2002). As part of an array of "stress and duress" tactics, *sensory deprivation* has been used in Afghanistan and Iraq and possibly other U.S. detention camps holding suspects in the war on terror (cp. Washington Post 2002; Washington Post 2004). Institutionalizing such techniques as an almost trivial component of the show certainly helps familiarizing the viewer with the idea of such methods being necessary under extreme circumstances. Before the background of public debate and controversy about real torture scandals and very real (perceptions of) terror threats, the crossing from fiction to reality is as tempting as it is obvious.

Not all acts of violence and torture in later seasons are as sanitized though. In Season 3 a man's finger is being cut off with a pocket-knife, in Season 4 a man is being subjected to electro shocks from a makeshift device built from a hotel room lamp. A terrorist in CTU's custody is shot in the knee when the interrogation doesn't give results fast enough, and in Season 5 the main character even resorts to shooting a former fellow agent's wife when he is convinced that nothing he could do to the man himself would make him talk. That the wife herself is innocent and not involved in any of her husband's doings is completely irrelevant.

Decisions about life and death are made in other regards as well. Especially the latest, fifth season evolves increasingly around the question of what can be sacrificed and whose and how many lives are dispensable. At one point, some members of the terrorist group that is in possession of 18 canisters of nerve gas are about to release one of them into the ventilation system of a shopping mall. With an undercover agent on site, CTU would have a chance to intervene and stop the attack but not without alerting the terrorists and thereby foiling the chance of following them to their hideout later and possibly securing the rest of the nerve gas. Trapped in the ethical dilemma of having to weigh a couple of hundred lives against potentially hundreds of thousands and only having a few seconds to make a decision, the President orders to sacrifice the people in the mall. The agent on site, however, disobeys the order and although he can't prevent some of the gas from getting into the ventilation system he manages to evacuate most of the people. At a later point in the season, the President is forced to make another fatal decision about whether to give in to the latest demand of the terrorists-to give up

¹³ Cp. 24, Season 4, episode 9 a.m. to 10 a.m.

the exact route of the motorcade taking the Russian President back to the airport after the summit meeting-or to risk the release of another canister of nerve gas. Aware of the international and political ramifications the President nonetheless gives up the motorcade's route and decides to rather sacrifice the Russian leader than the lives of American citizens. Due to events beyond the President's control, though, the ambush on the motorcade is averted in the last minute.

Another key aspect of the war on terror is interwoven much more subtle into the texture of the series although it is an integral part. Under the *Patriot Act*, the government's surveillance powers increase considerably in four respects: *records searches*, *secret searches*, *intelligence searches*, and *'trap and trace' searches*. Regarding *records searches* that means the government has now free access to any third party records about an individual's activities. The government can also conduct *secret*, so called *'sneak and peak' searches* on or of private property without notification of the owner. Regarding *intelligence searches* a narrow exception to the Fourth Amendment concerning the gathering of foreign intelligence information has been expanded, just like another exception concerning 'addressing' information about the origin and destination of communications which can be gathered in so called *'trap and trace' searches* (American Civil Liberties Union 2003). In the right-wing utopian world of *24*, the jurisdiction and abilities of its fictional intelligence agency CTU conform to (if not exceed) those surveillance powers. From the very first season on Jack Bauer and his fellow agents are able to access records and files, pull up schematics, tap into surveillance feeds and cameras, phone conversations and e-mails, use satellites and hack into computers like there are no restrictions to their legal—or technical—capabilities at all. Search or arrest warrants (not to mention applications for them) are practically nonexistent, as are the legal rights of the suspects who can seemingly be held for questioning or get interrogated at CTU's discretion.

There is one exception, though, in Season 4, when a suspect in custody of CTU and about to be interrogated—in other words, about to be tortured—suddenly finds himself represented by a lawyer sent by an organization called “Amnesty Global”. (Any similarities to real organizations are, of course, purely coincidental.) Being in possession of a court order prohibiting CTU from violating his client's rights, the lawyer denies any interrogation without his presence and of course any sort of torture. Over the course of one episode¹⁴ there are then several heated debates about this delay in the investigation, implicating that and making an argument why legal restrictions are nothing but a time-consuming obstacle. A first brief argument takes place between a CTU operative, Edgar, and his superior, Buchanan.

- Edgar: Considering what I've been through today, my mother dying because of these terrorists, I wanna know why we're letting some slimy lawyer protect a dirtbag like Prado [the suspect].
- Buchanan: We're not happy about it either and we're gonna fix it but it's gonna take some time.
- Edgar: That's time we don't have. [...] I don't like what's happening here. We have some PC lawyer holding us up from doing our job.

¹⁴ Cp. *24*, episode 12 a.m. to 1 a.m.

Minutes later, the same superior is confronted by the main character.

- Buchanan: (on the phone) I disagree with you, Your Honor. This does not fall outside the boundary of the Patriot Act. Yeah, alright. Thanks. (hangs up)
- Bauer: (just arriving) What the hell is going on here? You've got a key witness and a missing warhead. We should be pressing this guy with everything we've got.
- Buchanan: Judge Norton won't budge. If we want to appeal we have to wait till 7 a.m. to take it to an appellate judge.
- Bauer: Does he know what the stakes are?
- Buchanan: He does but he's feeling since Prado's got no record he shouldn't be treated like a terrorist.
- Bauer: What about the fact that he was caught meeting with a known terrorist in the middle of a night on a pier?
- Buchanan: Circumstantial.
- Bauer: Bill, we need to interrogate this prisoner. I don't care what kind of a court order they're waving at you.
- Buchanan: I agree, but his attorney's with him and a U.S. marshall protecting his rights.

Right after this, the main character storms into the holding room to talk to the lawyer himself.

- Bauer: (to a fellow agent) Curtis, why is the suspect not in his restraints?
- Curtis: Amnesty Global's orders. Precedes our authority.
- Lawyer: Mr. Bauer, my client is cooperating, he's not trying to go anywhere, all he wants is to be treated like any other U.S. citizen.
- Bauer: Your client aided and abetted the people who attacked the President of the United States today.
- Lawyer: You don't know that.
- Bauer: As a matter of fact we do.
- Lawyer: Then charge him.
- Bauer: (long pause) May I speak with you privately. (when they've stepped outside) You and I both know that your client isn't clean, and that he conspired to steal a U.S. nuclear warhead.
- Lawyer: All my client wants is due process.
- Bauer: Mr. Weiss. These people are not gonna stop attacking us today until millions and millions of Americans are dead. Now, I don't wanna bypass the constitution but these are extraordinary circumstances.
- Lawyer: The constitution was born out of extraordinary circumstances, Mr. Bauer. This plays out by the book. Not in a back room with a rubber hose.
- Bauer: (long pause) I hope you can live with that.

Discovering that "Amnesty Global" intervened after being tipped off by an anonymous source, CTU concludes that they're being used to delay the investigation. In a conference call with the President and his advisors, the main character explains the situation hoping to get the President to overrule the court order.

- Advisor: Am I correct in assuming that this suspect is unlikely to respond to the kind of Q and A his lawyer would permit?
- Bauer: That's correct. If we want any information from this suspect we're gonna have to do it behind closed doors.
- Logan: You're talking about torturing this man?
- Bauer: I'm talking about doing what is necessary to stop this warhead from being used against us.

Having just been sworn into office, the new President is however much too afraid that it could “haunt his presidency forever” if he ordered the suspect to be tortured and the man turned out to be innocent later.

President: Alright, gentlemen, here’s what I agree to. I’ll call a special session with members of the Justice Department and we’ll discuss this. I’ll have an answer for you in twenty minutes.

Bauer: Mr. President, this thing could be over in twenty minutes.

President: It’s as far as I’m willing to go right now.

Bauer: With all due respect, Sir, please let us do our jobs.

President: (long pause) I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.

A Judge who’s not flexible enough in regard to the *Patriot Act*, or possibly a *Patriot Act* that doesn’t go far enough, an idealist lawyer from an international human rights organization whose authority proceeds that of national law enforcement, and a president who rather talks than acts and is more concerned about his career than his country — those are the things keeping good agents from doing their jobs and saving “millions and millions of Americans”. If there was an award for *best delegitimization of potential obstacles in the war on terror in a television series*, this episode¹⁵ would be on top of the nominee list. It is by far not the only one featuring implicit delegitimizing contents though. To give only a few examples: the first episode of the fourth season showed the estranged son of the Secretary of Defense, a pot smoking left-wing activist about to attend an anti-war demonstration and disgrace his father, his President and his country. As later episodes reveal the son unwittingly helped terrorists in the kidnapping of his father by sharing information with a male terrorist he had sexual intercourse with. The same male terrorist is then implied to have sexual relations with a female killer, a recurring character since season 1 where she had a homosexual relationship until she shot her lover. Obviously, homosexuality or promiscuity are not the traits of the ‘good’ characters. Also in the first season, a female agent having an affair with her married boss turns out to be a turncoat agent and ends up shooting said boss’s wife. Over the next two seasons her character evolves into a ruthless (promiscuous?)¹⁶ terrorist who eventually gets “what was coming to her” when her former boss and lover shoots her to avenge his wife’s death. Over the course of the same three seasons, a presidential candidate’s wife with too many ambitions goes from being scheming and deceiving to being criminal and conspiring with terrorists to being shot by a co-conspirator. In the following year’s season, another female operative who initiated a relationship with a higher ranking agent to further her career shares her fate after being caught spying for the enemy. Apparently, being too independent and having too much sex doesn’t become the women in *24* well. The list of examples could be continued in regard to several other aspects but since it is lacking relevance for the study at hand it is sufficient to note that there is a considerable amount of implicit delegitimizing contents embedded in the series.

¹⁵ Cp. *24*, episode 12 a.m. to 1 a.m.

¹⁶ Random sexual relations and a resulting HIV infection are implied.

4 Politics in the Media

4.1 The Propaganda model

In *Manufacturing Consent: the political economy of the mass media* (1988), Herman and Chomsky develop a framework for the analysis of particularly the US media. Their *propaganda model* argues that the media market is dominated by major companies in the hands of profit-oriented elites. Naturally, these elites have no interest in publishing or distributing information that could lead to “popular indignation and, perhaps, government action hostile to the interests of all large investors, themselves included”. Also, there’s a certain solidarity with other elites since the media in their turn are dependent on key actors in politics, economy and society whom they need to issue TV or publishing licenses, place advertisement and commercials, and provide information. Last but not least, a dominant ideology can further congruence and coherence of media output. (Herman 2000)

Although the *propaganda model* has been criticized for being conspiratorial it has to be understood as explaining media behaviour and performance in a decentralized system of control and processing in which institutional factors and interests guide decisions about what is published or broadcasted and what isn’t and in which discourses are commonly framed “within the parameters of elite perspectives”. (ibid)

4.2 The Hollywood-Pentagon connection

After the terrible attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, the Pentagon consulted Hollywood in order to understand the new situation for US society. [...] Among those called in to assist were screenwriter Steven E. DeSouza (responsible for the movie *Die Hard*), director Joseph Zito (creator of *Delta Force One: Missing in Action*) and the TV writer David Engelbach (responsible for the MacGyver series). The irony of this is that makers of fiction were consulted to help the US administration face reality. (Ottoen 2004)

As David L. Robb points out in his book *Operation Hollywood – How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies*, there’s been a longstanding tradition of cooperation between Hollywood and Washington ever since WW I and increasingly so since WW II. The appointment of special liaison officers, large funding for movies with stories and themes favorable of US military, government or politics, technical and logistical assistance, the disposal of personnel, equipment and sites are all part of the package deal that brings good publicity and rallies public support (2004). In the aftermath of 9/11, the Pentagon is once again “hard at work participating in a number of movies that [...] deliver its message on the legitimacy of the war and its own conduct in Iraq” (Turley 2003). But in

recent years commercial television, as “the link between the entertainment and the news industry” (Ottosen 2004), has become more and more of a focus of attention for strategists in Washington as television series become influential policy tools. *J.A.G.*, for example, a show about military lawyers that premiered back in 1995 has seen a significant change of storylines since 2001. Instead of trying murder, desertion, or fraternization cases the main characters are now fighting terrorists in Afghanistan, Iraq or anywhere around the world, in court rooms as well as in covert operations or open combat. Sponsored by the Department of Defense, the show has for example helped rallying public support for military tribunals.

In fact, the Pentagon taught one writer for *JAG* [...] about procedural rules for the tribunals the Pentagon was establishing for members of Al Qaeda. *JAG* knew the tribunal procedures before the Pentagon even released that information to the press. (Heinzelman 2002).

As Robb describes in detail in his book, *J.A.G.*, like every Pentagon-sponsored production, has been the target of certain demands on scripts and storylines. With each and every episode featuring high-tech equipment and Marine Corps or Naval sites, the show is heavily dependent on the military’s assistance and would face serious difficulties without it. Reason enough for its producers to comply with any demand (2004).

Another example is the CBS series *The Agency*, “in which heroic CIA agents save the world from Arabic terrorists and villains”, and that had consultants from the CIA working on its manuscripts, locations and manpower put at its disposal, and with a little help from the real agency their funding increased to a budget of 30 billion US dollars (Ottosen 2004).

Unfortunately, there was no information available how much Pentagon assistance *24* has received over the years but considering the high-tech equipment CTU agents as well as terrorists have at their disposal (from night scopes to F117 Stealth Fighters) one can assume that there has been some cooperation.

4.3 Fox Television Network

24 airs on *Fox Television Network* which is part of the *Fox Entertainment Group* and the media empire owned by Rupert Murdoch’s *News Corporation* (Mediachannel 2000; Wikipedia 2006b). Included into this network is the controversial *Fox News Channel* that has been criticized for unbalanced news reporting and been accused of bias towards the Bush administration (cp. Outfoxed 2004). Murdoch himself made a lot of noise “when he ordered his editors, on a global basis, to support the US-led war in Iraq” (Ottosen 2004). According to *24*’s co-writer and co-creator Joel Surnow, the show was picked up with Murdoch’s “enthusiastic support” and although it’s first season was partly scripted and shot before the September 11 attacks, its pilot episode aired in November 2001, around the same time Karl Rove, senior advisor and chief political strategist to President Bush, gathered Hollywood producers and directors-including *Fox Network* representatives-in the earlier mentioned meeting to call “for support from Hollywood for the war on terror” (Watson 2005).

24 and the *Fox Network's* latest contribution to the “blurring of Hollywood fantasy with political reality” was the placement of a commercial for the renewal of the Patriot Act during a break.

While the fictional [agent Jack] Bauer was desperately searching for canisters of deadly nerve gas that had fallen into the hands of terrorists, viewers saw an advertisement questioning the wisdom of senators who would “weaken” the Patriot Act. “What if they are wrong?” the commercial asked. [...] Moments before on the show, Bauer had just gained a crucial lead about the nerve gas after threatening to cut out the eyes of a turncoat White House aide who was in league with the terrorists. (Dorning 2006)

Fox Network officials have also occasionally intervened to influence particular details of the show’s storyline. When, for example, in the fourth season terrorists shot down Air Force One, the original script had the President die in the crash. As Surnow disclosed in a television interview¹⁷ writers and producers of the show were however vetoed by network executives who were not fond of the idea of a U.S. President actually being killed in a terrorist attack. As a compromise, the President remained comatose and was succeeded by his Vice President.

¹⁷ *The Charlie Rose Show*, May 20, 2005

5 Conclusion

Since its premier in 2001, *24* has received both popular and critical acclaim that has earned the show more than 80 nominations and 25 *Emmy*, *Golden Globe* or other awards for its cast's and crew's acting, writing, or engineering performances. It is broadcasted in countries all around the world, including North and South American, Europe, Asia, New Zealand and Australia, South Africa, and the Middle East, and while its main attraction for the general audience undoubtedly derives from its high degree of urgency and suspense as well as its groundbreaking format, the series' thematic texture certainly adds another dimension of appeal.

One major element of the series is uncertainty because the storylines with their sudden and often shocking twists and turns are keeping the viewer in constant suspense and because you never know whom to trust or what happens next. Everything is possible and nothing is ever for sure. There are however also a few certainties that are implied and emphasized time and time again: that terrorists are lurking and plotting all around us, that attacks are possible—if not likely—at any moment, and that only a strong and powerful law enforcement can stop them. In the post 9/11 atmosphere this persistent reinforcement of the notion that fear is justified and quite reasonable is bound to fall on fertile ground. Playing moreover with scenarios of such close proximity to reality, or at least the perception of a potential reality, otherwise rather abstract threats are reified and visualized and thereby brought to the fore in the public mind. As a result terrorism is yet again highlighted as an indeed overwhelming if not the biggest threat to national security. And what *24* then does best is advocating what has been termed the “new thinking” in this study, the Bush administration's general response strategy to the new danger terrorism constitutes. Over the course of the last four years (in other words, from season 2 to 5) the ‘good guys’ have taken—or been forced to take—more and more desperate measures to stop attacks and save innocent people, expanding the boundaries of what's acceptable or tolerable into a territory that was off limits before. In the *24* universe law enforcement capabilities not only comprise but are based in the concepts of pre-emption and unilateralism, in the sense that force can be used without the burden of evidence and that international law, accords or organizations can be disregarded at lib. The borderline between domestic and abroad is blurry, and a place with such liberty and room for maneuver for the state and its bodies must be the Promised Land to right-wing hardliners in the White House or elsewhere.

Another borderline that is being blurred is that between reality and fiction. There's certainly nothing wrong with grounding a show or its script in reality, but *24* doesn't just reflect on terrorism and its impact but promotes a certain view on

it and a certain way of responding to it. In other words, it promotes the *war on terror* discourse under the Bush administration.

Although no evidence could be found that *24* is directly bankrolled or grant-aided by the Pentagon, considering the series' logistics and what other television shows have received Washington's assistance it is reasonable to assume that there has been some cooperation. Another indicator that there is an intention behind the show's propagandistic texture is that it is a product of the Fox Network and that no other than Rupert Murdoch himself, a man known for his (presumably ideology-based) affiliation to the current U.S. government has supported the program enthusiastically.

In the series' defense it should be noted that, compared to other Hollywood productions, it avoids the usual strict black-and-white pattern and moves instead within a grey zone. Heroes are not just good and villains are not just evil without a reason. Moreover, decision-making in the face of ethical and political dilemmas hardly ever goes without debate and discussion and sometimes the script is good for refreshing surprises. Most of the time, however, such arguments, from the introduction of facts down to the rhetoric, are much less balanced than they appear to be. Further research in form of a discourse analysis or a closer analysis of delegitimizing contents could reveal this in detail.

Summing up, the answer to the leading question of this study—how does *24* reflect and promote vital aspects of the *war on terror discourse*—is simple: by maintaining fear, typifying the new enemies, depicting the new threats and advocating the new thinking. As shown in the analysis it does so to a significant extent. However, it is also still a television show and at some points follows the rules of television and entertainment rather than those of politics. The intentions on part of the producers and financiers shouldn't be neglected or disregarded though. Surely propaganda has found its way into television before, but hardly ever with such purity and intensity.

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