

# Values in the Crime Drama '24': close to reality?

David Wilson analyses the attitudes to crime, criminals and justice revealed in the hugely popular television crime drama, 24.

**24** is one of the most popular programmes on BBC2, and as such regularly attracts millions of viewers, has a variety of web sites dedicated to dissecting and discussing the programme, has re-launched the flagging career of the lead actor Keifer Sutherland who plays the programme's hero Jack Bauer, and even has its own weekly discussion programme on BBC3 – called *Pure 24*, which debates the latest episode with guests before an invited studio audience.

Now in its second series, *24* has just reached the half-way point and this would seem as good a time as any to discuss the view of the programme in relation to crime, criminals and justice. In doing so it is accepted that there is a complex relationship between media representations of crime and the criminal justice system and that as Robert Reiner (2002) has put it, the relationship between "developments in the media and in wider society is a dialectical one" rather than the media acting as "an all-powerful ideological hypodermic syringe, injecting ideas into a passive public of cultural

criminals and justice.)

Bauer, who works for the Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU), and who in the first series saved the President from an assassin's bullet but couldn't save his own wife from being killed by a double-agent in the CTU, dubbed 'Nasty Nina' by the tabloids, is the classic anti-hero, bending the rules where these get in the way of achieving his objective. Not for him the hurdles and obstacles of 'due-process', because he has lives to save and precious little time to do so – as we are constantly reminded by the regular appearance of the time on the screen.

Bauer's need for speed and his willingness to do awful things for the greater good is at its most obvious in the very first episode. Needing to re-establish his credentials with a gang of right-wing militia, whom he had previously infiltrated and who are implicated in the bomb threat, he has a witness called Marshall Goran – who is going to give evidence on behalf of the government against the militia brought to him by his Witness Protection handlers. Bauer quickly establishes for the viewer that Goran is in fact a

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dopes". Thus, throughout this article, which is largely based on a content analysis of the first 12 episodes, it should also be remembered that the second series of *24* has been created at a time of heightened anxieties about Islam following the events of September 11, 2001 in New York, a subsequent American led invasion of Afghanistan, the pursuit of al-Qa'ida, the disputed status of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay and more recently an American-led, but widely opposed coalition which invaded Iraq. This background has significance not only for the narrative focus of *24*, but also for underlying themes related to the resolution of crime problems.

The premise of *24* can be explained simply, despite a variety of techniques used by the programme makers to encourage us to believe that in fact the narrative is complicated. Jack Bauer has 24 hours to find an atomic bomb that will be detonated by an Islamic fundamentalist group called 'Second Wave' in Los Angeles. Millions of lives may be lost. (It should be noted here that space does not allow me to discuss *24*'s treatment of Muslims and Islam and this article deals solely with crime,

convicted paedophile (and therefore undeserving of our sympathy), and whilst suggesting to these handlers "you want results, but you never want to get your hands dirty" he shoots and kills Goran. He then beheads him and takes the head as proof of his credentials to the militia.

Bauer's extreme behaviour in this episode and in this instance is emblematic of a more general approach to crime, criminals and justice taken throughout the series. Speed and efficiency aimed at controlling crime (or at least preventing the detonation of the bomb), unencumbered by legal safeguards or protocols, dominate the series. For example, there are no lawyers whatsoever in the first 12 episodes, and a journalist who is coming close to revealing the danger that the citizens of LA might be facing is simply kidnapped by the government. Moreover, if a suspect needs to be questioned this is done by law enforcement agents of various kinds and often in extreme situations. In short, most are simply tortured. Indeed, the new series opens with a suspect being tortured and it only gradually becomes clear that the torturers are 'the good guys' trying to extract information from a terrorist about the bomb. Over

the course of the first 12 episodes there are a total of six torture scenes, committed by both 'the good' and 'the bad' guys. Indeed in Episode 11 even the supposedly liberal, black President asks a secret service agent to torture one of his senior aides whom he thinks is working against him. He advises this agent to do "whatever it takes to find out what Roger Stanton knows about this bomb", and so over two episodes we see Roger Stanton being electrocuted, his hands tied behind his back and his feet in a bucket of water as the President watches on CCTV.

Of course the absence of lawyers, the kidnapping of journalists, and the torturing of suspects by Government agents is presented as a 'necessary evil' which will prevent a much worse disaster. The viewer is asked to permit these infringements of due process because the stakes are high. Indeed not only are we dealing with an atomic bomb in this period of 24 hours, but so far we have also seen a catalogue of crimes which has included at least 63 murders or unlawful deaths, 4 kidnappings, 1 instance of child abuse, 1 instance of domestic violence, 2 suicides and multiple fights. In doing so, as viewers, we are being asked to accept a criminal justice system that Packer (1968) characterised as "crime control" and which King (1981) has subsequently suggested is a criminal justice system dominated by punishment, disregard of legal controls, a presumption of guilt, high conviction rates and support for the police. Here

is a criminal justice system where the end justifies the means and in 24 those means are brutal and sometimes lethal. This is of course fiction, but the relation between what we are watching on TV in 24 and the continuing absence of rights for suspects on Guantanamo Bay, the more general denigration of lawyers and judges (and not just in the USA) and the supposed threat posed by the Islamic world which has been used to justify an invasion of Iraq against the wishes of the United Nations, seems perilously close to reality.

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