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*Representation of values in the  
American Society through a series :  
the example of 24*

## *Table of contents*

Introduction	p.3
I / American Family values in 24	p.6
A) The union in the different families	p.6
B) Split families	p.9
C) Children / Parents relationship	p.11
II) Government and National Security	p.14
A)The American politics	p.14
B)National security	p.16
III) Jack Bauer: the myth of the American hero	p.19
A) Jack Bauer, a perfect hero?	p.19
B) Jack Bauer, the “lonesome hero”	p.20
C) Jack Bauer, a tragic hero?	p.21
Conclusion	p.23

## ***Introduction***

The new place of series in the American media stresses the evolution of entertainment in the United States, and more generally worldwide. Why are series going to overtake cinema and are considered by many people as one of the most important cultural and entertainment phenomena with videos games and internet? We tried to find some answers to this question, which is tricky because it is linked to many sociological and cultural dimensions. Indeed, it seems that films of one and half hours do not satisfy watchers enough: they want either shorter stories to entertain for a while, or long stories which accompany them for many days. Indeed, series can be defined as a story told in one series or “season” (“season one”, “season two”, etc...) and divided into a certain number of episodes. Each episode has its own story, but it is always related to the season. It can be also watched either as a short story (an episode) or as a long one with a complex framework. In this case, series are in a way the successors of novels, insofar as both require regularity, attention, and a certain identification to the heroes on the part of the reader, or, in this case, the viewer.

We chose to use the series *24* in order to explain this recent phenomenon. The American series “*24*” (or “*24 hours*”) is created by Joel Surnow and Robert Cochran, and produced by Imagine Television. It is broadcast in the USA by the Fox Network and syndicated worldwide. The show first aired on November 6, 2001, with an initial thirteen episodes. After leading actor Kiefer Sutherland won a Golden Globe for his role in the first 10 episodes, the ratings were boosted, which prompted FOX to order the second half of the series. Five seasons of *24* have been produced, and the sixth began airing on January 14, 2007. This successful series won in total 2 Golden Globes and another 33 wins & 113 nominations. *24* is according to us a very good example for our analysis for two main reasons :

24, as we already said, won many awards and is watched by many fans. What was at first a dangerous bet of the producers is now considered as the key to success : indeed, the series stands out as a TV- series revolution because it is presented like a real-time action with each season following a 24-hour period in the life of federal agent Jack Bauer (played by Sutherland) as he tries to prevent terrorist attacks; the show also covers the actions of others associated with the attacks. Thus, it reinforces the dramatic aspect of the story, and especially the suspense. It seems, as if the characters and the viewers are experiencing events at the same time. This recipe is a success: the very well-built series, played by great actors, is really pleasant to watch, which made our exercise of viewing not so unpleasant to do!

Each season of 24 follows a similar format: a main story arc featuring Jack Bauer and the Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU) dealing with a threat posed to national security, combined with several interwoven subplots. Each season is aired in real-time and starts at the top of the hour on a given day. Each episode describes one hour of that day, with one season comprising 24 episodes. The show is set in Los Angeles, so the time zone used is Pacific Standard Time for the fourth season and Pacific Daylight Time for the others. Every episode from Season 1 onwards begins with Bauer saying: "The following takes place between (this time) and (this time)"; for Season 1, the voice-over is "The following takes place between (this time) and (this time) on the day of the California Presidential Primary. Events occur in real-time."

The season starts and ends at 12:00 a.m. The first half of the season centres on the efforts of a terrorist cell led by Ira Gaines to assassinate presidential candidate David Palmer. They kidnap Jack Bauer's wife and daughter in order to force him to perform the assassination and take the fall for Palmer's death. Jack defeats this cell in the process of saving his wife and daughter, but this only leads to information about a second group of terrorists

who had employed the first cell. The second cell is led by those ultimately responsible for the day's events: Andre and Alexis Drazen.

Two years prior to this day, Jack Bauer was sent as part of a classified team to Kosovo on the orders of a secret Congressional panel headed by David Palmer to kill Victor Drazen, Milosevic's "shadow." In order to keep Operation Nightfall totally secret, the panel never met nor knew the team of operatives, and vice versa, therefore Palmer and Bauer never knew about each other. The Drazens found out about both Palmer's and Bauer's involvement in their father's death and the whole assassination plot had been a means to get back at them -- Palmer would be dead, Jack would be imprisoned for the assassination, and his family would be killed.

During the last few episodes, the plot twists revealed many surprises. It was revealed that Bauer's team had only killed Drazen's body double. Drazen's wife and young children, however, were inadvertently killed, prompting the "eye for an eye" aspect of the plot: as Drazen's family died, so would Bauer's wife and daughter. We also discover that the real Victor Drazen was being held in a top secret underground prison later revealed to be under government control, and the Drazens' primary goal was to free Victor Drazen.

Bauer realizes that Nina Myers is the mole. He calls the head of CTU and tells him to detain Myers, but Myers, tied Teri up and shot her. Jack came to CTU and let them take Myers into custody (as opposed to killing her). He then discovered his wife's body<sup>1</sup>.

We believe that *24* is a true representation of the American society, with regard to the place of family ( part I ) and to the fear of terrorism ( part II ) and also to the myth of the hero in American movies ( part III ). As a successful series, *24* caught our attention because the themes it deals with and the way it approaches them are likely to have an influence on the viewers, who may subscribe to those views on society and the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the wikipedia's summary ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/24\\_\(season\\_1\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/24_(season_1)))

## ***I / American Family values in 24***

Family is a fundamental value in the American society. The main plot in 24, terrorism and espionage actually uses family to play with our fears. Indeed, in this series, the main characters are wives and husbands, father and daughter, father and son and those relationships are the key to the whole plot. Family is a weapon for blackmail, torture and even murders. There is an evolution in the main families during the series: The Bauers are a split family which becomes united while the Palmers are family above reproach which discovers its weaknesses and is finally torn apart. The Drazen family breaks the American values. First, they are not American (Serbian), and then they represent an “eye for an eye” value, contrary to the classic forgiveness value.

### **A) The union in the different families**

#### **- Bauer**

- The importance of the family structure: rebuild the family through the rebuilding of the couple

At the beginning of the season, Jack and Teri Bauer are just back together after a 2 years break-up. They have a teenager daughter, Kim, in conflict with her mother. Teri proposes a familial therapy, but the plot will speed up things.

When Kim is kidnapped, Teri has to trust her husband to get her back (episode 5). While Teri and Kim are both kidnapped, they keep hope thanks to Jack’s phone call: “everything’s gonna be OK, we are a family, that’s the most important” (episode 10).

Once free from his raptors, Teri does not want to leave Jack, saying: “each time the family is split, things go wrong. We should never split again” (episode 12).

Finally, when Jack loses hope of finding his daughter, Teri changes his state of mind by announcing her new pregnancy (episode 23).

- Teri and Kim's partnership facing their captors

While they were angry at each other in the first episode, they become closer to each other when they are kidnapped. When Teri still ignores the kidnapping of Kim, she is set thinking that her daughter has a problem when she says "I love you" for the first time in episode 2.

When Kim is about to escape during episode 7, her mother's scream dissuades her to do so.

During episode 9, Kim is in danger of being raped, Teri then decides to take her place.

This mother and daughter proximity helps them to discuss about the couple's intimacy between Jack and Teri, according to me, as being part of the family reconstruction process.

- Palmer

- Family as political marketing

Family and politics in the United States have always been linked. In 24, the Palmer family is completely integrated in the presidential campaign. They are part of the success of the Senator. It's such an important stake that it could also lead him to his failure.

When David Palmer wants to reveal the murder his son has committed, his campaign leader insists on the fact that his family has to agree with him before, because he needs them for his campaign.

Despite this family disagreement, David Palmer insists on the importance to remain united : "as if we were a family" (episode 7).

Finally, he decides to reveal the truth and argues this choice to the press during a speech: "if I'm not able to assume my family failures, I'll never able to run this country". (episode 19)

- Debate and family participation during the campaign

When David Palmer learns that he's in danger as a senator, he understands that the whole family may be concerned (episode 3). We can conclude that his political affairs are tied to his family ones.

Even if he decides to remain silent about his son's crime to protect his family (episode 4), he finally prefers to keep a harmony between politics and his family in revealing to the press his son's crime. He needs his family to join him in his choices (episode 19) to be sure to have a good ethic in his campaign.

- Drazen

o The brotherhood solidarity

During the first failure of the terrorist attack against David Palmer, Andre Drazen appears and threatens not to pay Ira Gaines if he fails in the next attack. His main argument is : "It's very important, don't forget that for me it's a family concern" (episode 10).

We learn later that Drazen's mother and sister have been killed by Jack Bauer (episode 15) and that an entire part of the plot is a family revenge. Andre and Alexis Drazen have both planned this attack to save their father and kill the ones who split their family.

o United to save the father

When we meet Victor Drazen for the first time, he totally trusts his sons to save him: "my sons are soldiers, they won't let me down" (episode 20).

This kind of scene leads us to consider this series more like a family story, than a real terrorism plot. Most of the action scenes are tied to family rescues, instead of real international terrorism threats.

Family conflicts are often at the origin of new actions, decisions and motivations. They are the real dynamic inside the scenario and they drive the characters.



## **B) Split families**

### **- Bauer**

- The difficult alliance between work and family

Terrorists use Jack Bauer's family to get control over his work. During the first part of the series, Jack tries to reconcile work and the disappearance of his daughter.

Jack's last sentence when his wife dies reveals this difficulty: "I'm sorry, I did my best to separate work from family, I did not succeed" (episode 24).

- Jack and Teri break-up because of a love affair between Jack and a colleague (Nina)

During episode 6, Teri confesses to her friend Alan that the special work of Jack has increased the distance between Jack and her. When she learns that Nina was Jack's lover, she can not trust her husband anymore and she does not reveal her new pregnancy. (episode 16)

### **- Palmer**

- David Palmer against his family

As soon as David knows about his son's crime, he is torn between keeping the secret or telling the truth to the press and breaking his family ties. He even tries to blackmail Maureen, the journalist, saying that his family would be destroyed if the truth was revealed.

David is afraid to be seen as unable to run his own family if this secret becomes public (episode 6). When David decides to tell the truth, Keith feels betrayed by his father: "you will go the White House, and I'll go to jail" (episode 8). But finally, after mister Ferragamo's death, Keith and Nicoll approve of their father's choice and agree less and less with their mother's policy (episode 19).

The choice of truth and transparency is considered as a fundamental family value in the series.

- The couple's break-up

When David Palmer learns his wife's implication in the faking of his son's murder, he can not trust her anymore, even if she said that she had done her best for the family and David's career. But David understands it was more to protect her place as first lady than the family. She tries to buy over Maureen. She makes her husband understand that he will not get by without her (episode 8). In spite of his wife's new face, David Palmer stays always calm even when she confesses she knew about Ferragamo's murder (episode 11) or destroys Keith's tape in episode 18. This thirst for power is so different from his conception that David asks his wife in episode 20 if his couple is over. Sherry would reproach to her husband for his attraction for Patty but she has finally no more credibility with David and has to leave David's life : "You're no longer a mother, no longer a friend, no longer a wife". (episode 24)

- Drazen

- Always being together

Even if Alexis Drazen dies at the end of the episode 21, Victor and Andre accept to trade Alexis with Jack Bauer in order to be together.

But this family link is based on violence and revenge. Victor Drazen doesn't respect his friend's family and kills his friend's daughter to keep Jack Bauer prisoner. This family doesn't respect fundamental American values and is punished by his violence : they all died at the end.

As we saw before, the family links are very important and relationships between parents and children is the heart of the action.

## C) Children / Parents relationship

### - Teenager problems

- Teenager in danger

Kim endangers herself many times by caprice : she runs away from home and is kidnapped in the first episode, then in episode 13, she exposes herself to the gunshots by opposition to her father's order. Teri totally trusts her daughter when she says she doesn't protect her captor while she does it.

Keith ignores the consequences of his act when he decides to reveal the truth about Mr Ferragamo's murder. Even if his father would like him to trust him, Keith decides by himself to denounce this crime and doesn't care about consequences (episode 14). Nichol accepts to protect her brother when he decides to leave the house, endangering himself.

In this series we understand that parents are more responsible than teenagers even if both are actually complementary.

- Betrayal between parents and children

Kim's escape in the first episode totally hurts her mother. She confesses in the fifth episode she feels guilty because she would like her daughter to leave the family home.

When David Palmer learns their children lied to him, he feels more betrayed than by his wife's lies. When Keith finally wants to tell the truth, their parents both disagree while his father convinced him earlier to be honest. The boy is so dismayed by this change of mind that he feels betrayed.

The trust between parents and children essential in this series and betrayal is often tied to new change of direction in the action.

### - Important place for the children

- Parents' choice according to their children

Just after they have been freed from their kidnapping, Teri learns she's pregnant. Kim accuses her of being selfish, but she doesn't really take into account her mother's situation.

Instead of being angry against Kim, she tries to explain that she didn't really want this pregnancy (episode 15)

In 24, children's opinions always have a strong impact on parents' reactions. We observe the same situation in the Palmer family, when Keith wants to use a tape to confound his father's campaign moneylenders. David Palmer decided to listen to his son instead of his other advisors (episode 16).

- Children as a necessary stability for adults

David Palmer's children are a key to his political campaign: they are supposed to bring young voters to the polls. From a family point of view, David Palmer represents an ethical leader for his children: Keith gives him the tape and trusts him (episode 17 and 18).

Teri's pregnancy is very important in the dynamic of the series. It represents a second chance for the couple and a new motivation to keep a united family. Teri's death at the end of the series has more impact by the fact that she was pregnant. In the American vision, it's like two important characters died. They recall us the family tragedy by showing us that she's been shot in the womb.

The fall of Jack Bauer in season 2 is tied to this loss: he has no more relationship with his daughter because of his wife's death. He has no more job and social life, he's nothing without his family.

## ***II) Government and National Security***

### **A) The American politics**

- *The position of the senators in the American system and the American presidential election*

There are two senators for each state of the Union. Generally, they have a bigger influence than the delegate. And many of the American presidents were formerly senators. David Palmer, the character of the candidate, is a senator of California. The story takes place during the primary. And California is a “key State” in the presidential campaign because this state is the richest and the most populated state of the Union. For example, Regan was the governor of California, before becoming a president of the U.S.A.

Another interesting fact is that David Palmer is a black senator. In the real world there is only one black senator, Barrack Obama, who is well placed for the democrat primary election. He is the only third black senator of the U.S.A. At the beginning of the series, the public thinks that the terrorists want to kill this candidate because of the colour of his skin. Basically, the series tries to show that the colour of the candidate has no links with the terrorist and that it does not have much significant. But using a black actor for the character of the politician is not a neutral choice. According to us, the scriptwriter and the producers of 24 try to have an influence on the American public’s state of mind. This choice means; what will be the problem of having a black president? And they use a very clever way : the public feels itself concerned, because at any time, they refer to this fact, as if it is normal and as if it could happen in real life.

The primary and the election time, is a very special moment in America. The first step to become a candidate is to raise money. That supposes having powerful support, like lobbies or generous donors, “friends”. The second step is

the primary, the election in the party in order to designate the ticket (the presidential candidate and the vice-presidential candidate) of the party for the presidential election. The last step is the presidential campaign between the two big parties of the country; the democrats and the republicans. Even if sometimes a rich man, who does not belong to the two big formations, can try his chance (like Perrot in 2000). The action takes place during the primary, and in California, a key state.

Many presidential candidates or many U.S.A. presidents have been shot to death. So, the assassination of politicians is a very realistic topic in America. And it is also a very common topic for fiction.

- *Balance of power between advisors, journalists and politicians*

The balance of power in the American elections is very well illustrated in the series 24. The influence of journalists and advisors (or supporters ) plays a big part in the evolution of the story.

When we watch the series, we have got the feeling that the politician is a toy in the hand of his own advisors or supporters.

For example, this phenomenon is highlighted by the story of David Palmer son's. His closest advisor tries to help him with illegal means. He acts like that, for the candidate interest, but furthermore, he does it for the support of the candidate. The supporters are people who invest a lot of money in the election of their candidate, and wait for a return after the campaign. The dividing line between support and lobby is very hard to determine. Finally, the candidate, David Palmer has the last word.

The other balance of power takes place between the candidate and the press. The journalist is an old friend of David Palmer's that supposes they have got special links (same studies, same friends and same background). In this case, the candidate tries to convince his journalist's friend to not publish the story of his son. He uses the vocabulary of pathos; he tries to convince her in the name

of their old friendship. In real life, the same things happen. For example in France, we all know that there is a special link between the politicians and the media.

What is very interesting in the series 24 is that the scriptwriter managed to show us how a politician is under pressure. He is at the centre of a system of influence and interest. Many people try to have an influence on his action, and many people can have an influence on him. That raises the key question of the freedom of the candidate, between lobby, support, advisor and media.

## **B) National security**

### **- The control of social scare**

On June 23, 2006, the US think tank *The Heritage Foundation* held an unusual panel event to discuss "24 and America's Image in Fighting Terrorism". The panel event, which was first conceived by Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas's wife, Ginni, was moderated by conservative talk radio host Rush Limbaugh. In addition to 24 executive producers Robert Cochran, Joel Surnow, and Howard Gordon, and 24 cast members Gregory Itzin, Mary Lynn Rajskub, and Carlos Bernard, the panel included Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff, and leading Homeland Security experts James Jay Carafano and David Heyman.

During the event, Limbaugh, a fan of the show himself, commented that "Everybody I have met in the government that I tell I watch this show, they are huge fans." He specifically identified Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Republican political strategist Mary Matalin as enthusiastic fans.

The fact that an important U.S. think tank pays attention to this series reflects the fact that 24 is a good mirror of the American society. This means that 24 is a realistic vision of the way American society imagines fighting

terrorism. And as we notice that Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld are “huge fans”, 24 could be considered as propaganda series. This propaganda has for aim the American society and also the rest of the world.

Series are a key element in the “soft power” of America and its first and most bankable means to have an influence on the rest of the world. For example, we noticed that our first impression on America, when we were young, was built by series. With these series America exports its own vision of the world. And it works, because of the quality of the product. With the example of 24, there is a dual impact. First of all, on the American public; the aim of this series, is to scare the public about a realistic threat. But on the other hand, they explain that this threat is under control. There are people who are taking care of you. On the other hand, this series was also produced for exportation. And the message of 24 for the rest of the world is that America is a big power, and that they will be able to endure and to answer any kind of attacks.

- *Financial and logistic means*

The biggest answer the series 24 gives for America to the terrorist threat is to illustrate the impressive financial and logistic means they have got. For example during his adventure, Jack Bauer always uses the best of the new technology; phones, cars, satellites, guns... All of this technological approach, is suppose to convince the public, that now it will be very difficult or impossible for a terrorist to hide.

The other example is the centre of the C.T.U. in Los Angeles. At any given time, people are working and ready to answer to any kind of threat. They are numerous, well organized, they have special skills...

- *The external origin of threat (America, police of the world)*

The last interesting point in the series 24, is the external origin of the threat. In the first episode the public thinks that terrorists are American and they



want to kill David Palmer because he is a black candidate of the presidential election. But at the end, the terrorists come from Serbia and the Balkans. And they want to take revenge on David Palmer and Jack Bauer because of what they have done in their country.

Finally, it appears that the U.S.A. has to do the dirty work in the world to preserve democracy and human dignity (the mission of Jack Bauer in Yugoslavia). And then they are victims of terrorist attacks on their own land because of their action. That is the old discussion around the isolationism of America, and the question of the external intervention in order to defend their interest and themselves.

### ***III) Jack Bauer: the myth of the American hero***

As the principal character in 24, Jack plays a prominent role in the television series and he appears in each episode of season one. As one of the best agents of the Central Terrorist Unit (CTU) in Los Angeles, he embodies to our mind the perfect American hero, in accordance with the traditional representations of heroes.

#### **A) Jack Bauer, a perfect hero?**

Bauer is a CTU agent who allies both strength and ingenuity. Besides, he seems to be attractive for women (his own wife, Nina Myers), which completes the myth of the hero. But we intend to underline the two first aspects of his personality. First of all, this former US army soldier knows how to overtake somebody and seems sometimes not aware of his own strength. He hit for instance Kevin Carroll with so much violence (episode 11) that he kills him, although he could have needed him for the escape from the camp where his family is locked up. He may thus sometimes get out of control but usually manage to suppress his emotions and his strength, which are necessary to complete the task at hand. This physical endurance permits him to accomplish two missions in one day, without sleeping and under a huge personal pressure.

Besides, he acts with ingenuity, which is more efficient when it can replace violence. The best example of this ingenuity is certainly his wonderful escape - when he was arrested by the CTU chief in episode 10 - : he manages to cover his tracks by unleashing the chimneys, which give off smoke.

#### **B) Jack Bauer, the “lonesome hero”**

Like “Lucky Luke” – created by Morris and Cossigny- , Jack leads his life alone, avoiding taking into account his obligations, such as obedience to his chiefs.

His strong personality creates problems in his work and his superiors don't trust him. For example, in episode 11, Bauer is relieved of his functions and replaced by Alberta Green, who suspects him of betrayal because he is seen as a disruptive element in the CTU. We also think that he accepts to work only with one person, Nina Myers, because he knows that he possesses a certain power over her. He doesn't hesitate to remind her of their former relationships in order to gain her confidence. The statement of the CTU direction George Mason in the first episode illustrates such an attitude : "Rules don't apply to Jack Bauer. He does what he wants, when he wants, and he doesn't care whose life it affects."<sup>2</sup>

But this individualism and this lack of humanity are turned towards a specific aim : Bauer's behaviour and actions are consistent with doing that which has to be done to protect the United States and its citizens. All means are acceptable in order to achieve this goal. When innocent lives are in danger he behaves as though obtaining a desired result is more important than how he obtains it, and he frequently performs controversial actions if he thinks they will achieve an important goal. He doesn't hesitate for example to practise torture, as we see in episode 10 ; he exerts a psychological pressure on Kevin Carroll by making him “waltz” with a dead body in a car and moreover makes Carroll bumping against the car-window in a violent collision.

Bauer is also a hero because he always obtains what he wants, but there are doubts about his methods. It reminds us of the current American questions about torture against terrorists or about the legitimacy of the Patriot Act. Bauer embodies this difficulty for people to have to face the decision of whether or not to let something tragic happen for the sake of a greater good. But the question is : how can we define the good for a society ? does it consist in more freedom or in more security ? 24 doesn't qualify the “ greater good” for America. It stresses rather the multiplicity of Bauer's facets : this hero is a “flawed hero”, heir of an old tragedy tradition.

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<sup>2</sup> Episode 1, sentence of George Mason.

### **C) Jack Bauer, a tragic hero?**

Bauer has many characteristics of a tragic hero. First of all, he is a flawed hero, who can be absolutely ruthless, freely killing, maiming, and torturing in pursuit of his goals, making him one of the darkest leading men in TV history. It reminds us of catharsis, this Greek notion invented by Aristotle which means "purification" or "cleansing". The term in drama refers to a sudden emotional breakdown or climax that constitutes overwhelming feelings of great pity, sorrow, laughter or any extreme change in emotion that results in the renewal, restoration and revitalization for living<sup>3</sup>. So as Bauer commits faults, is led by his passion (for example when he kills Kevin Carroll without being conscious of his actions), he reminds us Oedipus Rex, the Greek tragedy written in 428 BC : King Oedipus kills his father, loves his mother without being conscious of his actions. The audience may be purged of its excessive passions at the sight of such tragedies.

Moreover, Jack Bauer is confronted to the cornelian dilemma of either being a good father or achieving his duty. He manages to solve his family problems by acting as a hero in his personal life, but as Kevin Carroll told him in episode 11 : “All rescue acts, do you think it’s gonna save your marriage?”

Following the death of Bauer’s wife, we can note that he has actually no choice: there is no separation of his personal life and his duty. He has to live a life that has little personal purpose. The question is : will he manage in the following series, to stay the tragic hero who has to face dangers and plots, or will he choose to become more human, abandoning his tragedian characteristics?

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<sup>3</sup> Explanation found in Wikipédia.

## *Conclusion*

This series has the big advantage of looking realistic. That's why it has such a big influence. But its success in the entire world raises a big problem. The disadvantage of this intellectual system is the self – fulfilling prophecy. These series are supposed to be seen in the whole world. From an economic point of view, the goal is to have maximum profits, so they need to export. And when this kind of series is seen in the rest of the world, they could produce different kinds of reaction. Like a rejection of American policy in the world, or a rejection of the means used in order to defend this policy. Therefore this series could also encourage anti-American feelings.

Another major impact of these series on the American society is revealed by the fact that some GI accused of torture referred to 24 and agent Jack Bauer's action during their trial. The frontier between reality, imagination and fiction is getting more blurred day after day. Thus, according to Guy Debord, it appears that "the truth is only a moment of the fake".