

Delineating boundaries between 'us' and 'them'

A reception study of the representation of
Muslim characters in the television serial *24*

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Abstract

This thesis presents an examination of the US television serial *24*'s representation of Muslim characters, and it explores to what extent the perception of these characters can be determined by the cultural and ethnic belonging of the audience. The present thesis shows how *24* participated in forming an arena in which representations, mental images, social relations, and boundaries between ingroup members and outgroup members are constructed and negotiated.

The main reason for choosing to study *24* exclusively is that after 9/11 the serial played a central role in the public debate about whether Muslims are being stereotyped in US television entertainment. Hence, the thesis examines whether the critics of *24* have a valid point with regards to the show's portrayal of negative stereotypes. It also assesses to what extent the serial's effort to introduce Muslim counter-stereotypes proved to be an adequate response to the criticism. A qualitative research approach is used for examining *24* by combining textual and audience reception analysis. Close readings of selected episodes of the TV serial is carried out, and the crux of the analysis centres on whether, and if so in what respects the representation of the characters are stereotypical/counter-stereotypical. Moreover, it is examined how different interpretive communities of young adults, mainly from Norway, but also from the United States, read and perceive the portrayal of Muslim characters in the same television texts.

In the thesis, the analysis of *24* is presented in the form of four scholarly articles. Each article emphasizes different dimensions of the stereotype or counter-stereotype, each draws on different theoretical perspectives, and each can be related to different debates in media studies. The use of the stereotype and the counter-stereotype as analytical tools is pivotal for shedding light on the struggle over meanings of specific representational modes. The thesis aims to contribute to making research on these concepts more relevant for media studies by offering demonstrations of how they can be applied in the investigation of media texts.

Sammendrag

Denne avhandlingen presenterer en studie av den amerikanske TV serien *24*'s representasjon av muslimske karakterer, og den undersøker i hvilken grad oppfatningen av disse karakterene kan bli bestemt av et publikums kulturelle og etniske bakgrunn. Avhandlingen viser hvordan *24* deltok i å skape en arena hvor representasjoner, mentale bilder, sosiale relasjoner og grenser mellom inngrupper og utgrupper blir konstruert og forhandlet om.

Etter 11. september 2001 spilte *24* en sentral rolle i debatten om hvorvidt muslimer blir negativt og stereotypisk fremstilt i amerikansk TV underholdning. Dette er hovedgrunnen for å velge denne TV-serien som case. I studiet blir det undersøkt om kritikken rettet mot serien i forhold til dens mediering av muslimske stereotypier har substans. I tillegg vurderes det i hvilken grad seriens introduksjon av kontra-stereotypiske muslimske karakterer imøtekommer kritikken på en god måte. TV-serien blir undersøkt ved bruk av en kvalitativ tilnærming der tekstanalyse og resepsjonsanalyse er kombinert. Først blir det utført analyser av utvalgte episoder av TV-serien, og et sentralt spørsmål er her om fremstillingen av karakterene kan sies å være stereotyp/kontra-stereotyp. Det blir så studert hvordan ulike fortolkningsfelleskap av unge voksne, hovedsakelig fra Norge, men også USA, leser, oppfatter og fortolker fremstillingen av muslimske karakterer i de samme medietekstene.

Analysen av serien er utformet som fire vitenskapelige artikler. I hver artikkel vektlegges ulike dimensjoner ved begrepet stereotypi eller kontra-stereotypi. Artikkene trekker veksler på forskjellige teoretiske perspektiver og kan kobles til forskjellige diskusjoner innenfor medievitenskapen. Bruken av stereotypi- og kontra-stereotypi som analytiske verktøy er av avgjørende betydning for å kunne belyse hvordan kampen over meningsinnholdet til spesifikke representasjoner foregikk. Denne avhandlingen ønsker å bidra til å gjøre forskning på stereotypier og kontra-stereotypier mer relevant for medievitenskap ved gi demonstrasjoner på hvordan begrepene kan anvendes i studiet av medietekster.

List of publications

Article 1: Halse, Rolf (2013) 'The Muslim-American neighbour as terrorist: the representation of a Muslim family in *24*', was published in *Journal of Arab and Muslim Media Research* 5(1). Final version submitted July 2012 and published November 2012. All rights reserved. Copyright: Intellect Ltd, 2012.

Article 2: Halse, Rolf (2012) 'Negotiating boundaries between us and them: Ethnic Norwegians and Norwegian Muslims speak out about the 'next door neighbour terrorist' in *24*' was published in *Nordicom Review* 33(1). Final version submitted November 2010 and published August 2012. All rights reserved. Copyright: Nordicom, 2012.

Article 3: Halse, Rolf (forthcoming) 'Counter-stereotypical images of Muslim characters in the television serial *24*: A difference that makes no difference?', was accepted for publication by *Critical Studies in Television: the International Journal of TV Studies* in February 2014, and the final version was submitted March 2014. All rights reserved. Copyright: Manchester University Press.

Article 4: Halse, Rolf (2014) 'Textual poaching, gamekeeping and the counter-stereotype: US and Norwegian online fans' perceptions of positive portrayals of Muslims in *24*', was accepted for publication by *Nordicom Review* in March 2013, and the final version was submitted April 2013. The article is scheduled for publication June 2014. All rights reserved. Copyright: Nordicom, 2014.

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PART 1: FINAL CONTRIBUTION

1. Introduction

This thesis examines representations of fictitious Muslim characters from the Middle East in the popular US television serial *24* (*Imagine Entertainment/20th-Century Fox Television/Fox Network* 2001-2010). Hollywood's entertainment industry has a long tradition of producing and distributing Western images of the cultural Other, and particularly unfavourable images of Muslims and Arabs (cf. Michalac 1988; Shaheen 2001). Today, highly crafted, big budget television serials produced in the United States are distributed and consumed globally. By virtue of the great extent of their dissemination and the intrinsic politics of representation conveyed, these serials participate in forming an arena in which imagery, social relationships, identities and boundaries between 'us' and 'them' are constructed and negotiated.

Hollywood's distribution of contemporary images of Muslims appears at times to reflect an agenda that aspires to 'engage' with some segments of the Muslim community by presenting a few Muslims in major roles. Still, Hollywood seems simultaneously to be portraying Muslim characters through a repetition of certain reductive and negative tropes.

When considering the various positions of ethnic and racial groups within contemporary Western societies, Muslims from the Middle East occupy an exposed position. In dominant discourses in US- and European news and popular media members of the group tend to be portrayed by negative stereotypes and generalizations (Karim 2006; Pintak 2006; Richardson 2004; Miller 2006; Shaheen 2008). Since 9/11, the divide between 'us' and 'them' was widened in both Middle Eastern and Western media – a dichotomy which has lent strength to simplified ideas of a collective Self versus the cultural Other (Sisler 2008). Especially Muslims and Arabs living in the United States are arguably suffering from a kind of collective punishment after the spectacular terror attack on the country carried out by Al-Qaeda September 11, 2001. Describing the anti-Muslim and Arabic public opinion that existed in the United States in 2006, partly as a consequence of the 9/11 attacks, Jack G.

Shaheen (2008:49) asserted, with reference to a study, that about half of all Americans were reluctant to have Arabs or Muslims as neighbours. Representations of Middle Eastern Muslims in post 9/11 popular US television entertainment comprise an important object of study, as fictitious images of Muslims may spread bias and prejudice. The images of Muslims portrayed are culturally adapted and constructed to fit the present commercial, cultural and political interests of television channels, television producers and scriptwriters. They are composed so as to elicit the kinds of excitement, suspense or fear that fictional characters can arouse in television audiences.

Research on stereotypical representations of Muslim characters in Hollywood's entertainment should be contextualized within a broader narrative. As Michael Pickering (2001:xiii) puts it: "the task of making stereotyping part of a bigger story than that which is apparent in off-the-peg complaints of biased images in contemporary media representations, and in superficial conceptions of 'distortions' of an otherwise readily apprehended social reality." Arguably, early research in media studies that investigated stereotypes in media texts was preoccupied with what Pickering terms "superficial conceptions" of stereotypes (see Seiter 1986; Barker 1989). Many of these studies did not take into consideration how the stereotypes were perceived and interpreted by actual media audiences. For this reason, it is my aim to contribute to the field of 'stereotype research' in media studies by adapting concepts and frameworks from other studies in such a way that it captures the particularities that I investigate. This thesis examines developments and different dimensions of 'the Muslim stereotype', by taking *24* as a primary case. It also studies defining features of the concept of the Muslim 'counter-stereotype' – a representational mode that up to the present has been largely overlooked by media scholars.

1.1 Why investigate 24's portrayal of Muslims?

The television serial *24* premiered on 6 November 2001, and a total of 192 episodes were produced over eight seasons, with the last season finale broadcast in the home marked in May 2010.¹ Each season of *24* presents a series of complex storylines. In the first six seasons they revolve around the activities of international and domestic terrorists operating in metropolitan Los Angeles, but in the seventh season the drama is located in Washington D.C., and in the eighth in New York. Most of the storylines focus on the actions that the protagonist and hero, Jack Bauer, and his terrorist-combating colleagues undertake to avert the threats that different groups of terrorists compose. The international terrorists do not originate from randomly selected countries; they are linked to countries like the People's Republic of China, former Eastern Bloc countries like Russia and Serbia, and, most frequently recurring, Middle Eastern countries. All these locations may be said to have been perceived as unpopular and/or threatening to the United States at the time the seasons were produced. The show depicts the American President and his/her staff and the power struggles that underlie their decision-making regarding both military and non-military responses to the mounting terrorist attacks.

24 is interconnected with post 9/11 politics and culture during the decade it was aired in several ways, especially in the United States, but also abroad. The show is renowned in academic circles for having the status of the 'Urtext' of the 'War on Terror' (cf. Barnfield and Hammond 2011). *24* attracted a vast amount of viewers around the world, and unlike other influential and 'hyped' US TV serials, it demonstrated durability in terms of unfailingly high audience ratings in the home marked, which peaked in Season 5 (2006). This season attracted on average 13.780.000 US viewers per episode (see *ABC Television Network* 31.5.2006). *24*

¹ *24* will be brought back on US TV screens by *Fox* in May of 2014. The show will be part of the network's new directive to air event programming in the summer as a way to tie together the regular seasons, and will be entitled *24: Live Another day*. It will feature the return of the starring actor Kiefer Sutherland (Jack Bauer) and show runner/writer Howard Gordon. Accordingly, well-known names amongst fans of the TV serial will be respectively in front of and behind the camera. Other familiar features, like *24*'s real time approach will be left out, however. *24* will instead switch between episodes that highlight an hour out of a day in Jack Bauer's life, to play out 12 episodes during this particular day (Moaba 2013).

was critically acclaimed and received numerous television awards (and even more nominations), including Emmy Awards (68 nominations and 20 wins), the Satellite Award, and Golden Globe awards (twelve nominations and two wins) for best Drama Series. It also received ten Screen Actors' Guild nominations with four wins.²

After 9/11 the serial *24* played an important role in the public debate about whether Muslims are being stereotyped in US television entertainment. After the September 11 attacks, *24* presented a string of Middle Eastern Islamic terrorist characters, for instance, the 'master villains' Syed Ali (Season 2), Habeeb Marwan (Season 4), Abu Fayed (Season 6), and Samir Mehram (Season 8), all of whom are deeply committed to annihilating as many US civilians as possible. These characters mirror the menace that many people in the United States perceived Al Qaeda and the Taliban to pose at the time. When the second season of *24* was first broadcast in the home marked December 28, 2002, President George W. Bush had proclaimed and committed the country to a 'War on Terror'. So, instead of Serbs, who were the principal terrorists in Season 1, the villains were now of Middle Eastern origin. In Season 4, 6, and 8 hero Jack Bauer had to fight Middle Eastern terrorists yet again. The show provoked several US Muslim interest groups to protest how the show portrayed Middle Eastern Muslims characters.³ As a complaint issued by the *Council on American-Islamic Relations* (CAIR) on Season 6 stated: "The program's repeated association of acts of terrorism with Islam will only serve to increase anti-Muslim prejudice in our society" (Cited in Burstein and De Keijzer 2007:127).⁴ The serial has aroused sustained controversy on this point. Various Muslim spokespersons, including as the actors Shaun Majunder and Maz

² *24* came on sixth place on *IMDbPro*'s list of the highest average ranking TV series over the last ten years (2002–2012) (Schillaci 2012).

³ *24* has been accused by various Muslim interest groups in the United States such as the *Council on American-Islamic Relations* (CAIR), *American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee* (ADC) and *Muslim Public Affairs Council* (MPAC), for fuelling intolerance and prejudice towards Muslims (*BBC* 19.1.2007; Kanfer 2007).

⁴ Howard Gordon commented in the following way on the topic of Islamophobia within *24*: "I think the one thing that we all felt very confident about – although we had a vigorous behind-the-scenes debate – was at what point are we loyal and beholden to good storytelling, and at what level do you hold yourself accountable for things like stoking Islamophobia [...] as a policy? There were just certain things that we needed to portray in order to make it feel thrilling – and real, even" (Aleaziz 2011).

Jobrani (see Bakshi 2007), and Queen Rania of Jordan have castigated the serial. Queen Rania criticizes the show in a video clip she published on *YouTube* in 2008, asserting that she is surprised by some of the questions she has been asked about the Arab world and the Middle East: Do all Arabs hate Americans? Can Arab women work? She asserts that if what most people know about the Arab world and its people come from TV series like *24* and characters like Jack Bauer, they are in for a surprise. Accusing *24* for stereotyping Muslims in Season 4, Rabiah Ahmed – a spokesperson for *CAIR*, stated to *Reuters*: “We hope to correct the damage done by stereotypes, because it can affect American Muslims and their lives here. There are no positive or neutral representations of Muslims on television. Every time Muslims are depicted on television it is always in a stereotypical way” (*Bergens Tidende* 14.1.2005). The assumption implicit in these and similar comments, is that *24*'s stereotyping of Muslims can influence viewers in a problematic way, and that the outcome, in effect, can become damaging for the Muslim population.

Responding to the complaints of Muslim stereotyping during Season 6, *Fox Television* issued a statement that pointed to the wide range of villains that figure in the show. “No ethnic group has been singled out for persecution or blame,” *Fox* maintained (Burstein and De Keijzer 2007:127). *24* has made efforts to rebut allegations of stereotyping. The show's endeavours to achieve a balanced portrayal have included the introduction of Muslim counter-stereotypes in Season 6 and 8. These characters feature among the regular cast and are depicted in an ostensibly positive manner.

Little scholarly research has dealt with the issue of how Muslims are represented in post 9/11 US television entertainment, with the exception of Jack G. Shaheen (2008) and Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin's (2011) work. Consequently, one ambition with this dissertation is to contribute to fill a gap in the body of academic work that examines Hollywood's images of the Muslim Other. It also becomes important to shed light on this

issue when one considers the research on *24* that already exist – the large amount of scholarly attention devoted solely to a critical examination of *24*'s use of torture (see for example Howard 2007; de Wijze 2008; Nacos 2011; Hron 2008; Geivett 2008; Prince 2009; O' Mathúna 2008). Alongside the show's portrayal of Muslims, *24* drew criticism for its renderings and endorsement of torture towards the middle of the show's run (e.g. Žižek 2006; Mayer 2007; Poniewozik 2007).⁵

This thesis examines whether the critics of *24* have a valid point with regards to the show's mediation of Muslim stereotypes. Furthermore, it assesses to what extent *24*'s effort to introduce counter-stereotypes proved to be an adequate response to the criticism. A reception study is a fruitful point of departure, as this approach makes it possible to study both *24*'s text in depth and various actual audience groups' interpretations and discussions of it. The approach enables an examination of the meanings the stereotypes and counter-stereotypes in *24*'s text produce, through close readings and through readings made by various interpretive communities. The objective is to explore the potential meanings *24* convey through its portrayal of Muslim characters, in the course of which a prime goal becomes to shed light on the interplay between the text and its audience by examining how various groups of actual audiences interpret and perceive *24*'s representations of this group. Through investigating the kinds of cultural and political meanings *24* can create through its depiction of Muslim characters, the overarching research question is formulated in the following way: *how are Muslim characters represented in the television serial 24, and to what extent is the perception of these characters determined by the cultural and ethnic belonging of the audience?*

⁵ The renowned philosopher Slavoj Žižek criticizes *24* publicly for its use of torture. Žižek (2006) asserts that *24* depicts torture in a way that is fundamentally dishonest and consequently deeply damaging to our moral and psychological well-being. He expresses concern that the implicit message in *24* indicates a sad and “deep change in our ethical and political standards.”

1.2 *24* in US political discourse

This section provides a contextualization of issues that are addressed in my research articles on the show, contributing to an understanding of the specific political context for the show's reception among the American audience.

24 is a major feature of the globally distributed popular television culture that Hollywood exports worldwide. But unlike most big budget TV serials from Hollywood, *24* explicitly treats serious political issues. In every episode *24* deals with the major threats to contemporary Western societies that international terrorism poses. Viewers learn how the different challenges international terrorism poses may be confronted from the show's representations of political strategies and solutions. Although 'only' a popular culture text, the show displayed a political potency in the public sphere in the United States. In the following, concrete examples will be provided of how *24* made its way into political public discourse.

In today's media saturated society popular culture has a substantial role in forming identities and facilitating experiences. Mass mediated texts like *24* can play a role to inform citizens about the ways of politics, even though the politics represented may not be directly linked to politics and political events in the 'real world'. In light of the fact that the provenance of the contemporary public sphere is identifiable with popular alienation from public life (cf. Gripsrud 1992), many people acquire information on political matters through more or less fictional popular culture content.

24 had a great appeal to television viewers. The premiere night of Season 6 had for instance 15.7 million viewers in the United States alone, according to *Nielsen TV Ratings* (Mahan 2007). Moreover, *24* was widely broadcast in other parts of the world, including Africa, Europe, Latin America, Oceania, Asia, and the Middle East. The success of its formula is founded in part on the fact that *24*, better than other contemporary television serials after 9/11, succeeded in connecting with many viewers' fear-based longing for a masculine,

tough, protecting, and (white) male hero, i.e. Jack Bauer. A man who does not hesitate to take things to the extreme in order to protect American lives against international terrorism. The show became so popular that it turned into a phenomenon in various US popular media and was repeatedly drawn upon and intertextually linked by other US TV shows, commercials and news articles, especially in relation to humorous and satirical elements, but also in connection with more serious issues on the current news agenda.

A key trait to popular culture is that it refuses to acknowledge the traditional, hierarchical and aesthetic distinctions between low culture and high culture. In line with this, *24* not only entertained and enlisted the masses, but boasted fans and dedicated viewers among the US political elite, especially among the Republican party. The Republican Presidential candidate John McCane, for instance, made a ‘cameo’ appearance in Season 5 of the show. Then-Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld also declared themselves to be fans of the show. Indeed, *24*, which was broadcast for the first time just weeks after 9/11, came close to being the ‘official’ cultural product of the ‘War on Terror’ (see Poniewozik 2007). *24*’s relations with the Republican Party were confirmed in an interview the series’ creator, Joel Surnow, gave *The New Yorker*. In the interview Surnow boasted of the interest in, and appreciation of the show that members of the armed forces and the Bush administration had expressed to him. He commented: “It’s a patriotic show. They *should* love it” (Mayer 2007). It should be noted, however, that *24* also had avid fans among liberal celebrities in the United States, e.g. Barbara Streisand and Bill Clinton. Particularly the protagonist Jack Bauer’s way of combating international terrorism was debated in both Conservative and Liberal circles, and *24* was referred to in media political debates by generals, soldiers and politicians alike.

In the post-9/11 US political climate the appeal and political gain of referring to *24* was essentially founded on the sense that Jack Bauer personified a ‘bare knuckle’ approach to

the treatment of captured terrorists – a popular conception that increasingly permeated public discourse. *24* and Bauer's way of dealing with terrorists were brought up in political debates during election campaigns, in classrooms and at events staged by various think tanks (Bergman 2008).

In the latter phases of the serial's existence, Bauer had evolved into such a pervasive cultural reference in US public discourse that candidates for elective office sought to win voter's support by declaring they would be 'Jack Bauer's choice' in real life. For example Chuck DeVore, a Republican candidate in the California primaries for a seat in the US Senate, believed Bauer might energize his campaign, and put out a video that exhorted voters: "Ask yourself this question, Jack Bauer fans: Which person would Jack want as *his* US Senator?" (cited in Nacos 2011:279). This demonstrates how *24* distinguished itself from other Hollywood entertainment. Most popular television fiction – but also more quality-oriented shows – remains in the cultural and 'wild' part of the public sphere. By its inclusion and use in politics to mobilize citizens' and voters support, and as a point of reference with political significance that was ever-present in political public discourse, the serial exercised a direct impact on contemporary politics, taking part in the constitution of public opinion by which citizens steer the course of their country.

A recurring trope in *24* is the suggestion that these volatile times require those in charge to make difficult, even reprehensible, decisions when the choice is between saving American lives or giving in to the terrorist threat. Hence, the serial problematizes political and ethical challenges regarding the means applied in the 'War on Terror' and the dilemmas of having to choose between imperfect options. As Secretary Michael Chertoff of the US Department of Homeland Security asserted: "[W]hether it is the President in the show, or Jack Bauer, or the other characters, they are always trying to make the best choice with a series of

bad options.”⁶ He surmised that this may be a main reason for why people find the show enjoyable, and added: “Frankly, it reflects real life – that is [making decisions] what we do every day ... because not to make a decision is the worst of all outcomes.”

24’s emphasis on forced decision-making and the ethics related to a ‘the end justifies the means’ logic is connected to the serial’s temporality and ‘liveness’. Decisions have to be discussed, agreed and then acted upon in an extremely tight time frame. In 24, the pressures of second-by-second perils are frequently conflated with a ‘ticking time bomb scenario’ so as to heighten the suspense and drama. Those who favoured torturing captured terrorists found confirmation in this scenario; it lent moral support and legitimacy to their stance. For example, former President Bill Clinton, in connection with his wife’s Presidential campaign, was asked about his thoughts on the use of torture. While Clinton made it clear that torture did not have a place in official US politics, he also expressed his hopes that people like Bauer existed, people who would take personal responsibility and prevent terrorist attacks: “If you’re the Jack Bauer person, you’ll do whatever you do and you should be prepared to take the consequences” (*Today.com* 30.9.2007). Thus, we find a former Democratic President, campaigning on behalf of his wife in her bid for Presidency, invoking Jack Bauer’s way of fighting the ‘War on Terror’.

Another example of the impact 24 had was the serial’s corroboration of the Bush administration’s response to the threat of international terrorism, the ‘War on Terror’. After 9/11 the Bush administration arguably had to state a will of intent to change the course of action with regard to how to deal with terrorism. Consequently, amongst other things, the administration introduced legislation that authorized torture in the interrogation of ‘enemy combatants’ (a new category, allegedly not subject to the rules of war). In his book, *War by*

⁶ A mp3 streaming from the Heritage Foundation website [online database] relating to a conference in which 24 was debated (2006): “24” and America’s Image in Fighting Terrorism: Fact, Fiction, or Does it Matter? <http://www.heritage.org/Press/Events/ev062306.cfm>.

Other Means, John Yoo, the US Assistant Attorney General who authored the change in policy, cites *24* to legitimate the practice of torture (see Hron 2008:30).⁷

Thus, the ticking time bomb scenario and the dire urgency surrounding defending the nation against terrorism that the serial portrayed affected both real-life policies and the politics of how to deal with terrorism. US politicians, both Democrats and Republicans, were eager to express their support for the serial's no-nonsense approach. There is, however, a conflict embedded in their stance. The ideological message that *24* conveys is that there is no tolerance for the time-consuming nature of political processes or for careful deliberations on complicated and fundamental issues when dealing with terrorism. In short: when catastrophe is imminent, there is no time for democratic decision-making. Intelligence must be acquired as quickly as possible, at any cost. Furthermore, in *24*, deliberation is at best redundant. Any attempt to bring forward principled arguments is invariably represented as a retreat, as seeking refuge in principle. What is more, the manner in which political decision making is carried out in *24* is morally dubious in that it proposes the necessity of a kind of politics and execution of policy that is essentially anti-democratic.

24 demonstrates that certain popular culture texts can shape the broader terms of political public discourse and have an impact on debates about specific policies, as the serial gave popular fictional content a position in US public debates addressing issues of policy. One plausible consequence of popular fictional texts like *24* assuming a more prominent place in political discourse is that fiction becomes more firmly embedded in the public's consciousness. *24* highlights how popular culture content can be used to gain support in public opinion as a means to carry out politics more effectively. Well-known popular culture images may be invoked strategically to generate public support. As we have seen, politicians drew analogies from *24* as a means to make their political positions intuitively plausible to

⁷ Tony Lagouranis, a former interrogator at Abu Ghraib, has revealed that he and his fellow interrogators took inspiration for their torture, namely mock executions, from *24* (Hron 2008:30).

their audiences. As Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann observe (2006:18): “[B]ecause these [popular culture] narratives, and their significance, are widely accepted in a particular culture, the very act of linking them to the policy is sometimes sufficient to build support for a political movement’s goals.” What is evident is that *24* constituted a special case, as it, unlike most similar popular culture content, played a key function in the public sphere by its application as a politically charged reference in US political public debate. The serial had a role in the ‘War on Terror’ through its contribution to the formation of public opinion.

1.3 The structure of the ‘Final contribution’

The format of the summary/final contribution in Norwegian media studies varies to a certain degree, both in regards the structure, content and volume, as no dominant style has yet presented itself. In the present case the purpose of the ‘Final contribution’ is to frame, link, and contextualize the research articles. Moreover, the text aims to bring the articles in dialogue with scientific traditions in the field of media studies. The thesis consists of four articles and a summary. According to the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Bergen, the summary should not only sum up but also “present the problems and conclusions in the articles as a whole to document the coherency of the thesis. The contribution of the thesis to the field of research concerned must also be outlined” (Faculty of Social Sciences 14.9.2012). I have composed a summary in accordance with these criteria. Still, I have preferred to use a different heading – ‘Final contribution’, as I find it a more accurate description of this part of the thesis. This is an enhanced summary, and it is the part of the thesis that is written last. Moreover, it forms a substantial part of the thesis in its own right.

The ‘Final contribution’ is divided into five chapters. Chapter 2 discusses the research articles and their designated role in the dissertation. The chapter also summarizes the respective articles’ objectives and findings. Chapter 3 presents and discusses the theoretical

foundations of the key concepts in the dissertation. Moreover, it elaborates on two key paradigms in reception studies. Chapter 4 treats the two methodological approaches for my articles. The chapter elaborates on some of the strengths and weaknesses of the methods, and how the methods have been applied. The fifth and final chapter summarizes and discusses the principal findings of the four research articles in relation to the dissertation's overarching research question. The chapter also elaborates on the thesis' contribution to the research field.

2. The research articles

The four research articles constitute the foundation for the thesis. They have a twofold objective. The first is to examine the cultural and political meanings inscribed in *24*'s representation of Muslim characters. The second is to study different interpretative communities' reception of *24*'s renderings of Muslim characters. Each article in the thesis defines its own primary objective, while simultaneously providing an answer to the overarching research question. The contributions of each research article are interrelated.

Theoretically, the articles bring together scholarly work in media studies on representation, stereotyping, and media reception. Empirically, they represent the results of textual analysis of selected television texts and reception analysis of online fan readings and focus group interviews about audience readings. The articles are structured in relation to the notions of the stereotype/counter-stereotype, as the related concepts function as shared focal points that bind together and substantiate the articles.

The approach in combining textual analysis and reception analysis has been used previously in media research on television programs and their audience (see e.g. Brunson and Morley 1978, Morley 1980; Gripsrud 1995). The emphasis in this type of study tends to rest on the mapping of the meaning that is attached to the meeting between textual content and the audience. With this thesis, however, I have chosen a slightly different strategy: to complement and compare the textual analysis that I performed with the readings and understandings of different interpretive communities. In two articles selected storylines from *24* are examined through narrative analysis, drawing on research on representation in television and film. The two other articles use reception analysis to examine how the same storylines are read and perceived by various groups of viewers.

The stereotype concept is applied in the analysis of the primary text of *24* in the first article and of the secondary text in the second article (I also use this approach for articles 3

and 4, but here I engage with the notion of the counter-stereotype). In line with John Fiske's (1987) suggestion of a distinction between the different layers involved in the reception process,⁸ I define the primary text as the original and 'intended' text that is produced by *24*, i.e. all eight seasons of the TV serial, and it does not include the commercial breaks during the episodes. The secondary text (in Fiske's typology this is labelled as the "tertiary texts") is the text produced by the audiences who watch *24*. This text is gathered via focus group interviews of informants' readings of the primary text, and by fans' readings and discussion of the primary text in online discussion forums. Applying the stereotype/counter-stereotype concepts lays the foundations for a middle ground between textual and reception analysis, as the textual analysis uncovers how these two notions work within a television serial text, while the reception analysis sheds light on different interpretative communities' readings of the same text.

Season 4 of *24* was criticized by Muslim groups because of its representation of a Muslim family, living in Los Angeles as a sleeping terror cell. Therefore, the first and second articles set out to investigate whether the criticism is justified. In the first article, I carry out a textual analysis of how the family is represented, and in the next I investigate the ways different interpretive communities understand and interpret *24*'s representation of the Muslim family. This is then discussed in light of stereotype theory in media studies and social psychology. Latter-day social psychologists view the stereotype as a cognitive schema. Social psychologist Janet B. Ruscher defines a stereotype in *Prejudiced communication* (2001: 4): as "a specific type of schema, which is a network of beliefs that specify characteristics describing a certain concept. A stereotype is a schema about members of a social group,

⁸ Fiske (1987:108) provides the following definition of the different labels of intertextuality in the reception process: "We can envisage these relations on two dimensions, the horizontal and the vertical. Horizontal relations are those between primary texts are more or less explicitly linked, usually along the axis of genre, character, or content. Vertical intertextuality is that between a primary text, such as a television program or series, and other texts of a different type that refer explicitly to it. These may be secondary texts such as studio publicity, journalistic features of criticism, or tertiary texts produced by the viewers themselves in the form of letters to the press, or, more importantly, of gossip and conversation."

whether that grouping is based on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationality, regionality, or the like.” I use this dimension of the concept in my analysis of the various interpretative communities’ readings.

In the third and fourth articles I study how the portrayal of Muslim characters changed in the latter seasons of *24*. In *article 3* I employ the notion of the racial counter-stereotype as an analytical tool in textual analysis. Here, I examine counter-stereotypes through a close reading of the manner in which two Muslims main characters from the Middle Easter are represented in *24*. Aspects related to non-whites’ performance of whiteness form a focal point. In the analysis I draw particularly on the notion of the ‘postracial’, as this concept influences the shaping of Hollywood’s counter-stereotypical images. The article presents an inquiry into the effectiveness of including positive images of marginalized racial groups as a strategy to counterbalance or neutralize stereotyping.

Finally, in *article 4* I study how two online fan communities, one in the United States and one in Norway, perceive and read *24*’s Muslim counter-stereotype. I present a slightly different conceptualization of the counter-stereotype in this article. Here, the term is understood as an attempt to negate a stereotypical view of an ethnic group by presenting a member of the featured group who has traits exemplifying the opposite of the stereotype. In the analysis of the online fans’ readings, I make a distinction between the postings explicitly focusing on the ethnic construction of the Muslim counter-stereotype and those focusing on other dimensions.

2.1 Why a collection of articles?

As I intend to publish scholarly articles in well-established journals, choosing an article-based thesis instead of the traditional monograph seemed a good option. The article-based thesis has both benefits and challenges. On the minus side, it is challenging to synthesise the work, as it

consists of distinct research articles written at different stages of the PhD project. On the plus side, all the work that is involved in writing a doctoral dissertation is more manageable when divided into smaller units. I was thus able to focus on and investigate separate, but interconnected topics. The genre of the research article in media studies, as well as in related disciplines, requires that one presents an argument that is coherent and rhetorically persuasive. In contrast to a monograph, the article has a narrower scope and usually deals with a more limited subject. When I began constructing the PhD project, I was interested in how Muslim characters in *24* were read and perceived by various groups of viewers, and I wanted to investigate this from different angles. Hence, I found that the article-based format suited my approach. In retrospect I find that writing a monograph would not have been as good an option for acquiring the combination of breadth and depth that the articles present.

Newcomers to a research field can learn a lot from a thorough peer review process. My experience is that one often has to push oneself in order to meet a scholarly journal's demands. This was a key factor for me in selecting to write a collection of articles. In hindsight, I believe that the dedicated and meticulous feedback I received from the referees and editors associated with the journals improved the quality of my articles notably. In the course of the peer review process of *article 4*, however, I was unable to secure conceptual consistency for the 'counter-stereotype', a key term in the two last articles. The change occurred in response to the demands of a reviewer, which I had to meet in order for my revision to be accepted. I was asked to focus on the ethnic construction of the counter-stereotype, whereas my initial aim was to target the racial aspects of the concept (as I had in the previous article). In short, I found that I could not expect the referee to take into consideration a binding structure in my dissertation that secured conceptual coherency. Still, I believe that these two articles work rather well together despite this drawback, as I find that the referee's different understanding of the concept only underlines the ambiguity that surrounds the counter-stereotype concept.

The article-based dissertation format commonly results in some repetition of key elements, as it involves placing thematically related articles together into one book. In the case of my articles, it is especially the recap of the unfolding events to the selected storylines that is somewhat repetitive. In order for the argument to work independently repetition became inevitable, and I find this to be a drawback, but a minor one. Nonetheless, I have tried to keep the recap in the articles as short as possible.

The research process becomes ‘frozen’ in time when it is published in a series of articles. My goal was to publish them as I went along, dedicating focus and attention to one at the time. Hence, the articles were finalized at different stages of the project. This successive approach to the research object – itself a moving target – suited the project. An important aim was to keep track of the developments occurring in *24* in order for my research to be ‘up to date’ and interesting to potential publishers.

I began writing my dissertation in September 2008, a time when *24* was on a strong run that would eventually end two years later. Consequently, as the text I investigated developed and changed, so did my project. The approach for the second part of my thesis, which involves studying counter-stereotypes, was developed after I had finished writing the two first articles. I found out that I had to revise my original project plan in order to contend with *24*’s notable change in the construction of Muslims, which the inclusion of positive Muslim characters in the serial’s main cast represented. Thus, when read chronologically, the articles demonstrate conceptual renewal and show how the arguments have changed in response to the serial’s thematic development. In retrospect, I find that the strength of the article-based thesis is that it provides a flexible format for dealing with changes in an evolving and expanding TV serial text.

The articles forming the foundation for the ‘Final contribution’ were written with a two-fold purpose. First, they should provide the basis for the dissertation, and secondly, they are meant to be published in well-known international journals in the field. Still, according to

guidelines to the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Bergen (14.9.2012), publication is not an absolute requirement.⁹ I am, however, of the view that in an article-based thesis at least some of the articles should be published/accepted for publication in quality journals with peer review before the thesis is submitted. It is, I think, especially important in the field of media studies in Norway, where the article-based dissertation is a rather new genre.

2.2 A summary of the research articles

In the following I will present an overview of the four articles that briefly sums up their objectives and findings. The articles constitute the second part of the thesis, and are all singly authored. Two articles have been published, and two have been accepted for publication. I have revised the first article to some degree for the purpose of inclusion in this thesis, as the published version needed a few minor adjustments in order to improve the overall quality. I have not revised the rest of the articles, except for some basic changes in the format.

The first article, ‘The Muslim-American neighbour as terrorist: the representation of a Muslim family in 24’, was published in *Journal of Arab and Muslim Media Research* 5(1), 2013.¹⁰ The second article, ‘Negotiating boundaries between us and them: Ethnic Norwegians and Norwegian Muslims speak out about the ‘next door neighbour terrorist’ in 24’ was published in *Nordicom Review* 33(1), 2012. The third article (forthcoming), ‘Counter-stereotypical images of Muslim characters in the television serial 24: A difference that makes no difference?’, was accepted for publication by *Critical Studies in Television: the International Journal of TV Studies* in February 2014. The last article, (2014) ‘Textual

⁹ The Faculty’s guidelines explain that “The expert committee assesses whether the contribution is of a standard high enough to be published in periodicals with referees or by a recognized publishing house” (Faculty of Social Sciences 14.9.2012).

¹⁰ A previous and slightly different version of this article was published in Norwegian under the title ‘De kan være naboene dine’ – Fremstillingen av en muslimsk familie i sesong 4 av 24’ [“They could be next door”; the portrayal of a Muslim family in 24, Season 4], in the Norwegian media studies journal *Norsk Medietidsskrift* 16(3):231-251 (2009).

poaching, gamekeeping and the counter-stereotype: US and Norwegian online fans' perceptions of positive portrayals of Muslims in *24*', was accepted for publication by *Nordicom Review* in March 2013, and will be published in *Nordicom Review* 35(1), 2014.

Article 1: The Muslim-American neighbour as terrorist: the representation of a Muslim family in 24

Academic literature on movies and TV serials produced in Hollywood documents that Muslim and Arab characters are often represented in a stereotypical and negative manner. The television serial, *24*, is no exception. *24* has been accused of stereotyping Muslim by Muslim interest groups in the United States and by prominent individuals of Muslim background. This article sets out to investigate whether the accusation is well-founded by analyzing how a Muslim family/sleeping terror cell residing in Los Angeles is represented in the serial. A textual analysis reveals that each member of the family corresponds to one or another stereotyped image of Muslims in Western popular culture. The representation is linked to what Edward W. Said (1995) labels the 'Orientalism discourse' inasmuch as a systematic distinction is maintained between the representation of Jack Bauer and the Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU), on the one hand, and the family members, on the other. Bauer and the CTU represent Western values and are depicted as rational, progressive and superior. The family members represent Oriental values and are depicted as irrational, 'primitive' and inferior. At the same time, the family's unpredictable and violent actions do spread fear and cause great difficulties, both for their surroundings and for themselves. The analysis reveals a change in the Muslim stereotype in post-9/11 US TV entertainment having to do with the relocalization of the stereotype. In visual terms the new Muslim stereotype resembles the average American', which, in effect, redefines 'the Muslim Other': in superficial appearance it differs from the traditional Muslim stereotype, but within, in character, it is true to type.

Article 2: Negotiating boundaries between us and them: Ethnic Norwegians and Norwegian Muslims speak out about the ‘next door neighbour terrorist’ in 24

Interpretive communities can read a media text in different ways. The present article examines how different interpretive communities of young adults in Norway perceive *24*'s portrayal of the new Muslim stereotype – a stereotype that was first noted Jack G. Shaheen (2008) in the 2002-2003 US TV season and identified as ‘the Muslim American Neighbour as Terrorist’. This study investigates the understandings and attitudes informants express in their conversations about the Muslim ‘neighbour-as-terrorists’ stereotype, shedding light on the ways in which *24*'s text can mobilize stereotypes and encourage stereotyping among viewers. By means of focus group interviews that identify and ‘tap into’ the range and variety of attitudes and understandings, the findings reveal different patterns of reception. The ethnic Norwegian participants found gratifications in the TV serial’s storyline, while a majority of the Norwegian Muslims found it unpleasant and offensive. An important contribution to the (vicarious) fear that the stereotype evoked in the ethnic Norwegians was related to the challenge and tension it created in the negotiation process of categorization. The category ‘Muslim’ triggered a powerful response, and the conversation veered off in a xenophobic direction. This is an example of how an interpretive community modified its perception of the stereotype through socially patterned readings.

Article 3: Counter-stereotypical images of Muslim characters in the television serial 24: A difference that makes no difference?

In the early years of the millennium counter-stereotypes gained prominence in Hollywood entertainment. Applying counter-stereotypes is an attempt to negate a stereotypical view of a

racial group by presenting members exemplifying the opposite of stereotypical traits usually associated with the group. The representation of people of colour who act in a counter-stereotypical manner is instructed by the hegemonic point of view delineated by Franz Fanon (1986) in his classic treatise, *Black Skin, White Masks*. In line with this, a key trait of counter-stereotypes is the appropriation of white mores and norms. Aspects related to non-whites' performance of whiteness become a focal point in this study, where I aim to examine counter-stereotypes through a close reading of how they are represented in the television serial drama, *24*. The article investigates counter-stereotypes in relation to how the show portrays Muslim characters, as the serial has been accused of stereotyping this specific group. In seasons following the accusation, *24* is more ambiguous in its representation of Muslims. *24*'s efforts to achieve a more balanced portrayal have resulted in the introduction of Muslims who feature among the regular cast and are depicted in a positive manner. The analysis centres on how the counter-stereotype operates in *24*'s text, and what its key characteristics are. It reveals that *24*'s delineation of the characters represents a difference that does not make any difference. The counter-stereotypes are constructed as Muslims of Middle Eastern origin who are deprived of empowering cultural references to their background. Instead, these characters are represented in line with a 'white' set of cultural practices and codes that become simulated and imitated. As shown in the analysis, their efforts to 'pass as white' fall short.

Article 4: Textual poaching, gamekeeping and the counter-stereotype: US and Norwegian online fans' perceptions of positive portrayals of Muslims in 24

This article presents a study of online fans' perceptions of *24*'s positively depicted Muslim characters from the Middle East. In the transition from analogue to digital era media consumption of the last two decades fans have emerged from a position in the margins to occupy 'stage center'. Fan studies in the analogue era have explored localized resistance

within fan communities' cultural practices, examining how this might lead to new understandings of gender, sexuality, and race, but there has been less work that examines the consequences of fans' cultural practices using digital media. This study undertakes a critical investigation of the cultural politics of 'poaching' among online television fan communities.¹¹ Like the rest of the show's regular cast, counter-stereotypes should be in focus for fans in their competing interpretations and evaluations of each episode in online discussion forums. The study includes a comparison of two online fan communities, one in the United States and one in Norway. An analysis of online readings with participating fans is carried out. The selected Muslim characters are labelled as counter-stereotypes, as they in *24* take a position opposite to the prevailing stereotype by proposing contrary patterns of behaviour. In recent seasons of *24*, most Muslims are still presented in accordance with the stereotypical image of the Islamic terrorist. The show's inclusion of Muslim counter-stereotypes, however, denotes a strategy on the part of the producer to meet allegations of stereotyping by including characters intended to confound the stereotypes. A central finding is that fans read *24*'s counter-stereotype in ways that can be described as reactionary.

¹¹ Michel de Certeau's (1984) concept of 'poaching', accounts for various tactics of popular resistance, e.g., how the subordinate classes elude or escape institutional control.

3. Theoretical perspectives

This chapter has two parts. In the first I set out to present and discuss the theoretical foundations and analytical implications of the key concepts that have informed the dissertation as a whole. Taking the concept of representation as my starting point, I will move to the two closely related representational modes that constitute the binding structures of this thesis: stereotypes and counter-stereotypes. Next, I survey the research on Muslim stereotypes and counter-stereotypes in US TV series and film through a discussion that centres on studies carried out on post-9/11 images of Muslims.

In the second part, I elaborate on two important paradigms in reception studies: ‘reception theory’ and the ‘encoding/decoding’ tradition. I will not present a complete review of these traditions, but elaborate on how key studies are positioned in relation to debates in the paradigms. I will focus my discussion on the works that has the greatest bearing on my research question. I place particular emphasis on the ‘encoding/decoding’ paradigm, as seminal work carried out in this tradition has been an important source of inspiration for me when I designed the basic frameworks and chose the methodological approaches for the articles.

3.1 Representation and the notions of the stereotype/counter-stereotype

Stuart Hall (1982:64) provides a definition of representation as “the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping: not merely the transmitting of an already existing meaning, but the more active labour of making things mean.” Representation thus re-present something out there in the world by placing different signs together in order to delineate complex abstract ideas and concepts in ways that convey meaning. A painting, for example, can be conceived of as standing for the person it depicts. However, as Hall’s definition

suggests, the concept involves more than just a painting that is intended to represent an actual person, or even some fictitious phenomena. Under the influence of general semiotics the meaning of ‘representation’ has expanded considerably, so that every sign becomes a representation (Larsen 2008:20).

Informed by semiotics, a rather simple definition of representation describes it as “the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system which deploys signs or any signifying system) to produce meaning” (Hall 1997:61). This definition implies that things in the world do not have a fixed meaning – instead they should be viewed as constructed. It suggests that signs and signifying systems are always in flux. Still, the definition opens up for a degree of cultural positioning concerning the things that become represented. As a consequence, there is a need for translation as one move from one culture to another. Hence, people’s sense-making is dependent on the practice of interpretation, which is sustained by people who actively apply the code (encoding), and by others at the receiving end who interpret this meaning (decoding) (see Hall 1980).¹²

Signifying practices are representing the world in an active way, by selecting which parts should be highlighted and which should be left out. The process that involves such practices is usually described as selection and construction (Taylor and Willis 1999).

Representations in the media also re-present the world, and are based on selections and framing. Moreover, representations in the media are more or less consistent with established conventions and norms within the professionalized media systems. In relation to Western television’s way of representing the world, Richard Dyer (1985) has located and labelled four

¹² The term ‘interpretive communities’, often used in reception studies, is a concept that can shed light on the importance that context and affiliations have for people’s meaning-making practices. The term was originally coined by Stanley Fish (1980) to refer to both writers and readers of particular genres of texts. Among constructivist-oriented media scholars today an interpretive community is commonly understood as a group that is involved in the construction and maintenance of reality within the ontological field which defines their concerns. The conventions within the codes applied by interpretive communities become naturalized amongst its members. People can belong simultaneously to several interpretive communities (cf. Chandler and Munday 2011).

different connotations of the term 'representation'. The first use of the term is subject to popular television's selection, emphasis and aesthetic and technical codes (a re-presentation of the world). The second category is as being representative of, or typical of, the 'real world'. Are TV representations of Muslims, black women, white men, the working class, etc., typical of those groups in society? The third sense of the concept indicates a democratic notion of being spoken for, or represented in a fair way. The question here concerns who is speaking on these groups' behalf. The last use of representation asserts that questions that audiences ask concerning the television text are substantial. Dyer (1985:44), for example, suggests that viewers of TV programs should ask themselves the following questions: "What sense of the world is this programme making? What does it claim is typical of the world and what deviant? Who is really speaking? For whom? What is represented to us, and why?"

One representational mode that is particularly prevalent in popular television, and which often becomes connected to Dyer's second and third questions, is the use of stereotypes. A likely reason for the presence of stereotypically portrayed characters in TV shows, is that it is an effective and economic device. When characters are depicted stereotypically, the nature of the character is quickly and easily established in the mind of the viewer. This can be conveyed, for instance, through certain codified postures, character traits or manner of dressing. The writers and directors can spend less effort (and, not least, air time) on the character's introduction. Stereotyped representations in TV shows are like iconography – a form of short hand – because they place characters in the storyline based on rules and conventions that often are taken for granted. The aesthetic dimension concerning how stereotypes function in media's storytelling should not be omitted in any study of stereotypes in media texts, albeit it was very seldom included in the research on stereotypes in the media that predominated in the 1970s and 1980s (see Seiter 1986).

The stereotype concept entails more than representing characters in narratives – be it in fictitious or more fact-oriented storytelling. Other dimensions of the concept are also drawn upon in my articles. As the stereotype plays a fundamental role as a binding concept for this thesis, I will devote the following pages to an outline of relevant theory and research on stereotypes, with particular emphasis on works in media studies.

A brief historical perspective on the stereotype concept

Appropriated from the trade vocabulary of typography and printing, the stereotype was introduced into scholarly discourse by Walter Lippmann in 1922. Lippmann defines it as the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights (Lippmann 1991). He provides two contradictory understandings of the concept: on the one hand, he describes stereotypes as both deficient and biased, to the advantage of those who uses them. In this political sense, Lippmann contrasts stereotypes with individualized understanding. Furthermore, he asserts that they constitute obstacles for rational assessment and resistant to social change. On the other hand, he regards stereotypes as necessary means to achieve efficient information processing. Particularly in the highly differentiated societies this is inescapable, as we must all create order out of "the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world [...]" (Lippmann 1991:55).

Through this psychological approach to the concept, Lippmann equates stereotyping with broader patterns of typifying and representation, i.e., people's general means of thinking and making sense of the world (Pickering 1995:693). The existence and utilization of stereotypes can therefore be explained and understood in two different ways: first, from the viewpoints of the dominant forces' need to create and sustain structures of difference and power, and, second, from individuals' need to economize their cognitive processes. Perhaps unsurprisingly, scholars in media studies have traditionally taken (and still take) Lippmann's

first delineation of the term as their point of departure, while researchers in social psychology have almost exclusively dealt with Lippmann's second definition.¹³ A series of survey research projects from the 1930s to the 1950s applied the second definition to examine the correlation between belief in stereotypes and personal contact with members of the stereotyped group (Buchanan and Cantrill 1954, cited in Seiter 1986:16). It was presumed that individuals would at best hold stereotypes only lightly, and would eventually change them once they had contradictory evidence or new experiences.

Lippmann's work was continued by studies in empirical social science in connection with the Second World War and the ensuing crisis in the social and national stereotypes (Andersen 1993:93). Siegfried Kracauer's (1957) examination of national stereotypes in Hollywood movies and Th. W. Adorno and his co-workers' (1950) study of the authoritarian personality were two key empirical works in this connection. In these studies stereotypes were viewed as an expression of aberrantly and undemocratically socialized individuals' projections on vulnerable groups. In Adorno's (1950) study stereotypes were considered as the irrational cognitive product of chronically intolerant people whose personality structures had been formed in the hierarchical, conformist, exploitative social structures associated particularly, but by no means exclusively, with the rise of Nazism and Fascism (Pickering 1995:694).

Morally and politically motivated empirical research of this kind continued in the post-war period, but in the 1960s and 1970s, racial and gender stereotypes in the media became the preferred object of investigation (Andersen 1993:94). Feminist media scholars contributed with critical studies of media images of women and the likely effect they had on audiences.

¹³ Lippmann was aware of the contradictive nature of his approach to stereotypes. For him, the dilemma of stereotyping constituted an endemic difficulty for the modern Western world. His solution to the problem was problematic, to say the least, when assessed from a liberal democratic perspective. Lippman envisaged a scenario of technocratic, centralized mediation and social planning, where specially trained experts managed society in a 'rational' and 'objective' way (Pickering 1995:693). He furthermore believed that these disinterested experts would have 'facts' available which would in the event of societal conflict and upheaval provide the foundation for a neutral resolution.

This issue was high up on the research agenda during the 1970s, and an important theme of this research was to criticize the media for the images they conveyed. Many of these studies showed that the media represented women in stereotypical roles, to the extent women were represented at all (see Gallagher 1981).

In a similar fashion, a considerable number of quantitative content analyses in post-1960 media research identified and evaluated negative stereotypical images of outgroups and minorities. Researchers of this era tended to perceive the images as vehicles of ideological transmission on the part of the media industries (McQuail 1983:135-136). The research on racial and gender stereotypes in this period provided documentation of bias and prejudice in media representations, and more importantly, it contributed to increased public awareness around these issues by placing them on the agenda for discussion in the public sphere. Much of the research, however, was based on a functionalist understanding of the media, wherein the mass media were by and large seen to reflect the dominant values and norms in society. Experimental methods or quantitative content analysis were the preferred method. According to Ellen Seiter (1986), these studies often failed to specify: (1) what is meant by a stereotype (often used just as a 'dirty word'), (2) the genre and the media content's narrative, (3) the type of media, and (4) the audiences' experiences of it.¹⁴ Hence, the real or fictitious characters' relation to one another, the verbal and visual traits (dress, pose, dialect etc.) applied to signal the character, and typical roles in diverse genres, which should also be important aspects to consider, were largely ignored. Furthermore, much research on the media's images of women tended to trace direct or indirect effects of the media's stereotypical images (cf. Van Zoonen 1994, cited in Mühleisen 2002:68).¹⁵

¹⁴ See Ellen Seiter's (1986) discussion of typical studies from this approach to examining media stereotypes.

¹⁵ Renowned media scholars have warned against research in the effects-tradition that makes presumptions about direct media effects (e.g. Morley 1980; Hall 1980).

Defining features of the stereotype

In the near-century since Walter Lippman's *Public Opinion* (1911), where he dealt with stereotypes as the self-serving and irrational social perceptions that often influence individual behaviour, many researchers have applied the stereotype concept in their work. In ordinary discourse it is commonly defined as an adjective that is used to describe something that is "fixed or settled in form; hackneyed; conventional" (Beruflsen and Gundersen 1999:337). Stereotypes are important to people; they can provide tactics and solutions for the ordering of an increasingly complex and confusing social reality. Briefly put, in academic discourse the term is often understood as a simplified, generalized characterization of a group of people.¹⁶ The notion of the stereotype term is taken as a point of departure for research especially in the fields of media studies and social psychology. In media studies it has traditionally been viewed as a form of categorization of certain kinds of people. As a consequence, the stereotypes were identified in media content and categorized by researchers – particularly in popular media texts.

Unlike the traditional approach to examining stereotypes, I believe that it is important to draw a line between stereotypes and categories, as these terms differ in several respects. There is also a need to counter the assertion, which is especially prominent in contemporary social psychology (see e.g. Ruscher 2001; Hinton 2000 i.a.), that it is impossible for human beings to avoid applying stereotypes. This view can quickly end up being an excuse for the acceptance of people's or media's recurrent application of negative stereotypes to certain groups. Inspired by Michael Pickering's (1995, 2001) contributions to the study of stereotypes, I define the stereotype as a representational mode which, like categories, constitutes an effort to impose a sense of order on the world, but with the pivotal difference that it to a large degree lacks the flexibility categories operate with.

¹⁶ The concept can also be perceived in other ways by scholars, for example in reference to ideas and 'settings'.

The definition of stereotypes that I suggest does not entirely coincide with the traditional view, as media research has tended to operate with a view of stereotypes as being pejorative, simplistic, overgeneralizing, and distortive, which while not a poor description of them, like stereotypes themselves, is somewhat sweeping. Tessa S. Perkins (1979) disagrees with the classical view, and sums up the generally accepted presumptions about stereotypes in ten points. According to Perkins (1979:138) the classical view is that stereotypes are: (1) always erroneous in content; (2) pejorative concepts; (3) about groups with whom we have little/no social contact; by implication therefore, are not held about one's own group; (4) about minority groups; (5) simple; (6) rigid and do not change; (7) not structurally reinforced; (8) the existence of contradictory stereotypes is evidence that they are erroneous, but of nothing else; (9) people either 'hold' stereotypes of a group (believe them to be true) or do not; (10) because someone holds a stereotype of a group, his or her behaviour towards a member of that group can be predicted. Perkins (1979:140) argues that stereotypes should not be characterized as being rigid and asserts that when stereotypes change, the differentiation of stereotypes is accommodated by alternative stereotypes rather than by an expansion of the stereotype.

Another example of her critique concerns the view of stereotypes as simple (5), which Perkins finds to be misleading. Stereotypes are both simple and complex, because they implicate knowledge about a complex social structure. Perkins (1979:139) takes the example the 'dumb blonde'. To understand this stereotype in an adequate manner demands that one sees more than just hair colour and lack of intelligence. It refers to her sex, which again connotes her status in society, her relationship to men, her inability to behave and think rationally, and so on. It is also wrong, she argues, to assume that stereotypes are always pejorative concepts (2), as they can be both positive, rather neutral or negative. Albeit in

everyday life they tend for the most part to reflect negative attitudes, and convey social prejudice and discrimination (Pickering 2001:11).

Contrary to Perkins, Pickering argues that a defining feature of stereotypes is their rigidity. With respect to the difference between categories and stereotypes, he asserts that “stereotyping may operate as a way of imposing a sense of order on the social world in the same way as categories,” but it denies flexibility in order to reinforce “the conviction that existing relations of power are necessary and fixed” (Pickering 2001:3). Accordingly, it is the lack of flexibility which separates them from categories, as categories are flexible and have no fixed boundaries.

I agree with Pickering’s observation that stereotypes are characterized by their rigidity, but as Perkins points out, they can also undergo change in order to retain their relevance in new surroundings. This is in line with findings from my examination of the Muslim stereotype in 24. In my first article for this thesis, I argue that a change occurred in the Muslim stereotype in US TV entertainment post-9/11 having to do with the relocalization of the stereotype from the Middle East to the United States. The major Muslim stereotype today has the appearance of the average American, which differs from the traditional Muslim stereotype. Thus, the Muslim stereotype, like a chameleon, has adapted its visual signifiers to a changing geographical and cultural environment, but retains an element of rigidity in that it still posits the same defining character traits.

Stereotypes often have contrary features, and ideologically, it is commonly their purpose to bind such contrary features together (Pickering 2001:14). Thus, stereotypes can be shown to be poor descriptors of the many aspects of social life, experience and identity that are marginalised and ignored in mainstream media texts.

When a group poses a problem to other groups, stereotypes constitute a way of dealing with this problem. Take, for example, Muslim minority groups living in Western countries.

Radical Islam has become an increasing problem for the West, especially when linked to terrorism. For many Westerners it has become a truism that terrorism stems from Muslims originating from the Middle East. When the West represents Muslims in terms of stereotypes, Muslim minorities in Western countries will more easily be distanced from non-Muslims in their surroundings. Stereotyping them is thus a strategy whereby one deals effectively with the threat they pose by reducing distinctions within the group to a few characteristics that they all presumably possess – in effect policing and the reinforcing the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Counter-stereotypes in the ‘postracial’ era

In this section I shall sketch out defining features of the counter-stereotype. Except for the two articles in this dissertation in which I apply the term, there exists almost no work to draw on with regard to the concept. To my knowledge only one article, written by Éric Macé (2009), deals with it. Therefore, I will begin by addressing the concept indirectly, discussing some major points in the ongoing debate about the term ‘postracial’, as this term offers an explanation as to why counter-stereotypes have become more widespread in US popular culture today.

American Blacks have traditionally been disproportionately represented in US television in images of criminals, drug dealers or users, products and perpetrators of broken families and in other unflattering lights (Press 1993:219). However, as representations of Blacks (and people of colour in general) in US television are arguably less uniform today, the question is then what the new representations are, and where they fit the ‘postracial’ system that is being put forward and negotiated. The increase of counter-stereotypes in US television entertainment is part of an overall change in the representation of people of colour. Counter-stereotypes may serve as a distinct indicator of the blurring of colour lines in US popular

culture, as they reflect a larger process in racial politics, where racial paradigms are changing. It is rather commonly held today that the United States has now entered a 'postracial' era. The diagnosis is apprehended and discussed in diverging ways by scholars, however.

As conceptualized by Paul Gilroy (2002), 'the postracial' – analogous to David Hollinger's notion of 'postethnicity' (2000, 2008) – refers to a future in which racialized hierarchies, racial notions, and the dominance of whiteness is overthrown. Gilroy (2002:37) writes that "the perceptual and observational habits that have been associated with the consolidation of today's nano-science might also facilitate the development of an emphatically post-racial humanism." He asserts that it is screens, rather than the eighteenth-century lenses that first documented 'race', which now mediate the pursuit of bodily truths. Gilroy sees a liberating potential of new technology that relegates notions of race to the past – race becomes viewed as an 'after image'. Hence, counter-stereotypes, understood here as mediated images of a supposed 'postracial world', can be an important element leading to the achievement of a favourable outcome. Gilroy's conceptualization of the postracial may have implications for the struggle for equal opportunities and the redistribution of social power, as it describes an era when the discriminative hegemonic system of classification is abandoned. But the question is, how to abandon it, and Gilroy does not provide any profound answers.

Along similar lines, Hollinger (2008:1033) contemplates a future in which the ethno-racial categories central to identity politics in the United States would be more matter of choice than ascription. The phenomenon of Barack Obama, the country's first black President, may be taken to imply that the United States is moving towards a postracial era, as his election supports the notion of a growing uncertainty about the significance of colour lines.

In contrast to those who insist the postracial era is not far away (or is here already), some scholars remain sceptical about what they describe as the myth of the 'postracial'. Tim Wise (2010) and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010), for example, both rebuke the idea that race

has all but vanished as a factor for shaping the life chances of all Americans, the proposition that lies at the heart of postracial liberalism. Furthermore, they criticize President Obama for propagating the postracial myth and ‘colour blind’ politics. According to them, he has reached the level of success he has by making strategic moves towards racelessness, by adopting a postracial persona and political stance. Bonilla-Silva (2010:179), an oft-heard voice among the critics, envisages instead of a postracial future in the United States, an emerging triracial system, comprised of whites at the top, an intermediary group of ‘honorary whites’ (including most Middle Eastern Americans), and a non-white, collective black group at the bottom. Hence, postracial policies and politics are deemed inadequate for remedying continuing racial inequities.

Racial counter-stereotypes can be located in this field of tension between the two camps of scholars on the issue of the postracial, as it displays an essential ambiguity, being characterized by ‘colour blindness’ in both a positive and negative sense. A portrayal of a person is regarded counter-stereotypical when it stands in contrast to the stereotype of the group he/she is assigned to or ascribed to. Utilizing counter-stereotypes in popular media texts can be an attractive strategy when representing peoples of colour, as it displays an attunement to today’s multicultural and multiracial society. Counter-stereotypes constitute a distinct representational mode of people of colour on television. Macé (2009:10) defines the term in the following way: “At the narrative’s centre, the counter-stereotype takes the opposite position to that of the stereotype by proposing a ‘reverse’ performance [...] The counter-stereotype shows middle class people of colour or people of colour with prestigious social status, playing main characters [in TV programs].”¹⁷ In his conceptualization, Macé connects the term both to the labels of class and race. Furthermore, he underlines that the

¹⁷ Another distinct representational mode which Macé (2009) utilizes for people of colour represented on television is the anti-stereotype (I do not apply this concept in this dissertation, as I do not find it of relevance for the primary text which becomes examined). Anti-stereotypes are dissimilar to counter-stereotypes by being more present in a counter-hegemonic dynamic, as they question and trouble stereotypes as part of a broader reflexivity about post-colonial ethnicities (Macé 2009)

representation of people of colour which operate in a counter-stereotypical manner, is instructed by the hegemonic point of view delineated by Franz Fanon in his classic treatise, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Macé 2009:12). Hence, a key trait to racial counter-stereotypes is the appropriation of white standards.

Research on Muslim stereotypes and counter-stereotypes in US TV series and film

Scholars who have carried out historical and analytical textual studies on representation of Muslims and Arabs in American popular film and television are largely unanimous on one finding: Muslims and Arabs are generally represented in a negative, stereotype manner (e.g. Semmerling 2006; Fuller 1995; Woll & Miller 1987; Shaheen 2001, 2008; Morey and Yaqin 2011). In an analysis of contemporary American television series that include Arab and Muslim characters, Jack G. Shaheen (2008), perhaps the most prominent scholar in this research area, finds that little has changed since 1984, when he wrote that television tends to perpetuate four basic myths about Arabs: “They are all fabulously wealthy; they are barbaric and uncultured; they are sex maniacs with a penchant for white slavery; and they revel in acts of terrorism” (Shaheen (2008:45). He argues that the rare moments when a program tries to exhibit a balanced observation of Arab or Muslim life are more than compensated by shows which render the easy recognizable stereotypes. Shaheen provides here an analysis of how *24* depicts Arabs and Muslims, and he has little positive to say about the serial. Accordingly, during three of *24*'s seasons, US government officials in the show spewed slurs on Arabs and Muslims, which went uncontested. Shaheen underlines that he had to watch “Bauer’s violent

actions justify the torturing and the killing of numerous Muslim and Arab ‘fanatics’, and stopped counting after 100 or so dead bodies”(Shaheen 2008:49).¹⁸

A few scholars disagree with view that Hollywood represents Muslims and Arabs in a negative, stereotype way. Daniel Mandel (2001:19-20) criticises the individuals and organizations which have made such allegations. Through an analysis of six selected films, most of which have been accused of Muslim and Arab ‘bashing’, Mandel dissects the critics’ accusations. He finds Hollywood’s action-movies using stereotypes as natural, as part of the formula. The success of action narratives as a genre is attained through the selection of readily recognizable protagonists and antagonists. In addition, Mandel (2001:28) also contends that stereotyping in Hollywood tends to be factually based, pointing to the fact that many anti-American terrorists in the world today are Muslims or Arabs.¹⁹

Bernd Zywiets (2011) uses the concept ‘*Angemessenheit*’, German for ‘adequateness’, ‘fittingness’, or ‘appropriateness’, in his effort to denounce what he perceives as an unscientific approach that scholars who criticize Muslim and Arab stereotyping in Hollywood entertainment have taken. Central to his argument is the contention that these scholars evaluate movies by checking if they are *angemesen* (Zywiets 2011:190). As an example Zywiets uses Shaheen’s (2001) interpretation of the film, *True Lies* (1994), whose stereotypes Shaheen characterizes as distortions of reality. To some extent I agree that Shaheen’s reading is problematic, especially in light of the insights offered by post-structuralist scholars’ regarding the impossibility of a text having a single meaning and purpose. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Zywiets’ argument misses the mark with regard to the other works he treats. Most of these studies are not subject to this fallacy. Lina Khatib (2006) and Tim Jon

¹⁸ Morey and Yaquin (2011) and Stephen Prince (2009) provide similar readings of how Muslims and Arabs are portrayed in the serial. In a close reading of Season 2, Morey and Yaquin (2011) find that *24* conveys the message that the mixing of Western and Arabic cultures is a mistake that should be avoided at all costs.

¹⁹ Mandel (2001:28) writes that: ”Closer inspection of the State Department figures indicate that, for the four-year period 1996-99, of the 48 Americans who died in terrorist attacks, 42 of them lost their lives in incidents carried out by Muslim or Arab terrorists.”

Semmerling (2006), for example, offer nuanced, complex, and in-depth analyses of Muslim and Arab characters which cannot be reduced to a simple evaluation of the movies' 'Angemessenheit'.²⁰

Zywietz (2011:191) asks rhetorically why any given movie "ought anyway to reflect reality in terms of statistics, fairness or complexity. Why not accept that *True Lies* or *The Siege* show us just *some* but not *all* Muslims and Arabs; that movies are [...] without claims to be representative [...]." His critique is here aimed at Shaheen's way of analysing films, but the problem he encounters is that Shaheen's investigation of stereotyping in film involves far more than a study of just one or a few movies. For example, in the book *Reel Bad Arabs* (2001) Shaheen documents and discusses over 900 movies. Based on a survey of the portrayal of Arab characters in Hollywood movies since the beginning of cinema, he concludes that US moviemakers from 1896 to this day have considered all Arabs as "public enemy number one" (Shaheen 2001:2). Consequently, the issue here is not that a movie should be "without claims to be representative," but the prejudices that the repetitious nature of negative stereotypical images of Muslims and Arabs in film and TV series can engender, and the damage this can do, especially for Muslim and Arab minority groups.

Arguments involving the good and the bad characters in a film or TV show have recently been taken as a point of departure in debates about representation of groups in exposed situations, such as Muslims. An illustrative example of *counter-stereotyping* is when the persons responsible for a television show counter charges of stereotyping by emphasizing the TV show's balance – that they are portraying simultaneously positive and negative images of a certain group. This was the case with *24* when the serial introduced positive Muslim

²⁰ In a close reading of several popular Hollywood films depicting American villains/Orientalist Others, Semmerling (2006) amongst other shows how geopolitical and economic anxieties concerning the relations between the United States and the Middle East are repeatedly rendered and reflected by insecurities concerning sexuality and gender.

characters in the latter stages of its run, in an effort to achieve a more ‘balanced’ portrayal of this group.

As in 24, there has arguably been an increase of counter-stereotypes in Hollywood’s TV series and films in recent years. Yet, there is very little scholarly research on counter-stereotypes. Some studies in the 1990s examined (and, to some extent, documented) Hollywood’s inclusion of positive representations of African Americans as principal characters in television series and film (see Hall 1996; Gray 2004; Lewis and Jhally 1992). These works exemplify the dilemma of principal characters of colour who are not representative of the racial group to which they belong in terms of social background or cultural practices. Justin Lewis and Sut Jhally (1992) showed in a content analysis that a plethora of middle- and upper-middle class black characters populate the screens in US prime time entertainment. They then carried out a series of focus group interviews and analyzed the reactions of ordinary Americans belonging to different racial groups and a range of class backgrounds, to the *The Cosby Show* (Carsey Werner Company/NBC 1984-1992). On the basis of this investigation, Lewis and Jhally (1992) asserted that US television was responsible for providing a slew of questionable stories that maintain a cultural refusal to deal with class inequalities and the racist foundations of those inequalities. *The Cosby Show* focuses on an upper-middle-class African American couple and their children and is renowned for altering the face of US TV entertainment, as the series represented African American families in non-stereotyped roles. According to Herman Gray (2004:80), the show enacted an insistent “recuperation of African American social equality (and competence) through the trope of the stable and unified black family.” Jhally and Lewis (1992) claimed that the series represents blackness in a limiting, post-Civil Rights focus.

Shifting the focus to the portrayal of Muslim counter-stereotypes, Shaheen (2008:45) argues in his study of how Muslims are portrayed in recent years in US TV series, that the

profusion of damaging Muslim stereotypes has continued after 9/11, with the exception of an Iraqi character, Sayid Jarrah, in the TV serial, *Lost* (*Touchstone Television/Bad Robots/ABC* 2004-2010). I find Shaheen's statement to be imprecise, given that there actually are other Muslim characters portrayed in a rather positive, counter-stereotypical manner in TV shows that he evaluates – for example, Darwyn Al-Sayeed in *Sleeper Cell* (*Showtime* 2005-2006) and Hamri Al-Assad in Season 6 of *24*. Peter Morey and Amina Yaquin (2011) identify additional Muslim counter-stereotypes in textual analyses of 'War on Terror' TV serial thrillers. Indeed, *The Grid's* (*BBC/Fox TV Studios/Carnival Films* 2004) character, Raza Michaels, is a Muslim CIA agent who has a pivotal role in combating international Islamic terrorists. Michaels, nevertheless, is ultimately undercut by a storyline that involves a relationship that crosses race lines accompanied by the character's death. Consequently, *The Grid* undermines the possibility of a middle ground or a hybrid identity, as the serial otherwise, according to Morey and Yaquin (2011), presents a story in which matters are resolved through a simplistic confirmation of binaries – where the Muslims are pathologized.

In their analysis of *Sleeper Cell*, Morey and Yaquin (2011) underline that the main character in this TV show, Darwyn Al-Sayeed, does not constitute the 'stock trade' white alpha-male hero in action thrillers. Instead, this first Muslim US action serial protagonist, in line with a key character trait in the Muslim counter-stereotype, displays moments which clearly reveals flaws to his personality (see *article 3*) when the high demands of his moral code occasionally prove too much for him to support. In order for him to be identifiable (and thus likable) for a white American audience, Al-Sayeed represent what Morey and Yaquin term 'Islam Lite', that is, Islam with all the alien and awkward bits removed. Al-Sayeed, they point out, practices a Sufi kind of Islam where men and women can pray together, and where his personal take on Islam is rendered in such a way that it is consonant with the historically dominant US ideology of Protestant individualism.

The examples I have provided from scholarly work demonstrates the need to fill a gap in research on representations of Muslim characters in contemporary Hollywood fiction, as no study on post 9/11 Muslim characters in TV series and film has yet taken on this ‘new’ representational mode. Articles 3 and 4 in this thesis – studies that deal with Muslim counter-stereotypes by employing the concept as an analytical tool – set out to uncover and interpret various facets of the concept – represent my contribution to filling this gap.

3.2 Reception

Reception studies examine the interplay between the text and its audience. The proliferation of studies examining reception, however, has not yet produced anything remote of conceptual unanimity, as the term ‘reception’ has come to characterize quite diverse and remotely connected theoretical traditions from various academic fields. In this expanding, heterogeneous and rather unruly research field it is not easy to get a satisfactory overview. The parameters of definition to reception studies are ranging from conceptual or shared aesthetic concerns to research united by common traditions of methodology, or even common geographical focus of leading proponents (cf. Sandvoss 2011:231).

For my present purposes, I find it appropriate to distinguish two main theoretical approaches or paradigms in reception studies that have been preoccupied with the interplay between the text and the audience in their respective fields: ‘reception theory’ and ‘the encoding/decoding’ tradition. Reviewing these two theoretical paradigms is a fruitful exercise, as they describe the roots to, and the formative influences on, contemporary work on reception. Both have been labelled ‘reception’ because each tradition in its own way emphasizes the significance of the meaning construction that takes place in the intersection between the text and its reader(s).

The first paradigm I elaborate on, reception theory, originated from the work on reception that was undertaken at the University of Constance in Germany. In short, reception theory is concerned with the ways in which literary works are received by readers. One of the distinctive features of the work that was undertaken at the School of Constance was that it posed a shift away in the academic discipline of literary studies from solely focusing on the text. Reception theory's strength was that it was rather homogeneous in its general approach and theoretical presuppositions. The importance of reception theory for media reception research is emphasized by Janice Radway (2007:328), as she argues that reception study's institutional efflorescence and consolidation happened because of the great impact that the key contributions of the School of Constance had. Indeed, the main theories that were developed here laid the foundations of the enabling conditions of the study of reception both in literary studies and in related disciplines such as media studies.

In media studies the term 'reception' is generally associated with audience reception. Moreover, in contrast to literary studies, where readers and reading are the commonly used terms, it is the concept of the audience that tends to organize its pursuit. Today, reception studies have grown into a potent tradition in media studies, where it is commonly viewed as a convergence of various paradigms (see e.g. Staiger 2005). Sonia Livingstone (1998:237-38) asserts that reception studies represents the convergence of six different research paradigms: (a) Hall's encoding/decoding model; (b) uses and gratification studies; (c) (within critical mass communication research) the idea of the resistant audience which emerged against the theory of media hegemony; (d) poststructuralism; (e) the feminist approach; (f) the culture of everyday life. Of these rather diverse paradigms, I will discuss (a) 'encoding/decoding' in this subchapter, as with Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model 'reception' gained prominence in

media studies. Another reason for focusing on this paradigm is that it was ordered by the privilege accorded texts and textuality, in contrast to most of the others.²¹

The School of Constance's reception theory

Scholars in 'reception theory' advocated the view that the text should be considered as a function of its readers and its reception, as they considered meaning as the result of a temporal process of reading. The two most influential theorists were Hans Robert Jauss, a Romance literary historian, and Wolfgang Iser, a scholar of English literature. Both developed groundbreaking theories in what would become known as 'reception aesthetics' (German, Rezeptionsästhetik).

With his 'Paradigm' essay in 1967 – published later in English with the title 'Literary history as a challenge to literary theory' (see Jauss 1970) – Jauss sought to challenge the Marxist and Formalist dominance in literary studies by viewing the history of literature from the perspective of the reader. He revitalized literary history by satisfying the Marxist demand for historical mediation while maintaining the Formalist advances in the research field of aesthetic perception (Holub 1995:321). Jauss' methodological framework involved inserting "the individual work into its 'literary series' to recognize its historical position and significance" (Jauss 1982:32). Here, he distinguished between "three stages of interpretation": 'understanding'/aesthetic perception, 'interpretation'/exegesis, and 'application'/historical reflection (Jauss 1982:139-185).

Jauss (1982) argued that literary texts are received against an existing horizon of expectations consisting of readers' present knowledge and presuppositions about text. Moreover, he asserted that the meanings of literary texts alter as such horizons shift. Jauss was thus interested in historical changes affecting the reading public. The aesthetic value of a

²¹ I would like to point out that poststructuralism also operates with a concept of the intersection between texts and audiences.

literary text was derived from the 'aesthetic distance' between the text and the audiences 'horizon of experience'. As of this, aesthetic value was viewed as dynamic and relational – as something that becomes manifested and measured in interplay between the text and the reader. He conceptualized the reader as an active agent in the reception of literary texts and hence in the formation of history. In Jauss' model, this 'relation aesthetics' was manifested in the triangle of author, text, and public, where aesthetics becomes an evaluative category in the analysis of texts (Sandvoss 2011:236). Aesthetic value can, therefore, be located in the relational and changing process of reception. His theory of evaluation and his concept of the horizons of expectation, however, depended on the contrast between a literary work and the horizon. Here, his theory of aesthetic evaluation relied on Russian Formalism, as Jauss' argued that aesthetic value can be decided by aesthetic distance. A weakness to his theory rests in this case in an overly reliance on the Formalists' theory of perception through defamiliarization to establish value.²²

In comparison to Jauss' preoccupation with the macrocosm of reception, Iser's work can be describes as being concerned with the microcosm of response (Holub 1995:327). Iser presented a theory of how to examine the horizon of expectation of the singular reader and processes of reading at the micro-level, as he was oriented towards the basic features of the reading process and the reader's engagement with a text. For Iser (1978), meaning is the outcome of an interaction between the text and the subject, as it is neither completely textual nor purely subjective. According to Iser, the aesthetic value of a text is comprised through aesthetic distance. Iser (1978:109) asserted that "literature takes its selected objects out of their pragmatic contexts and so shatters their original frame of reference." Hence, he, like Jauss, relied on the Formalists' theory of perception through defamiliarization to establish value. Iser conceived of a text as allowing "an extension or broadening" of the readers reality

²² By making novelty to be the singular criterion for evaluation, Jauss adhered to what Robert Holub (1984:63) described as a modern prejudice that can be linked to the infiltration of marked mechanisms into the aesthetic realm.

(Iser 1978:79). However, this only happened because it is perceived against that reality – as innovation, negation or deviation. This was not an unproblematic stance towards an aesthetic evaluation of a literary text, and as Holub (1984:63) pointed out, past areas appear to have appreciated texts as much for their similarity with, as their difference from, traditional norms. In Iser's works, however, this aesthetics of negativity became connected to audiences' potential for emancipation.

The encoding/decoding paradigm

The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) and the theorist Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model constituted a shift in media studies towards reception, as this model represented a key contribution in making the study of media audiences and their interaction with mass media texts a fruitful enterprise. Scholars affiliated with the CCCS carried out influential reception research in the 1970s and 1980s, and certain works that investigated audiences/subcultures' ability to resist or to negotiate 'dominant' media's texts is particularly renowned.

In contrast to the School of Constance's orientation towards texts, textuality and model readers through introspection, in the encoding/decoding paradigm actual audiences and their social contexts were of matter – e.g., power relations and characteristics within and between social groups. The paradigm that the CCCS established is often referred to as 'critical media studies' – reflecting the fact that research under Stuart Hall, who became the centre's Director in 1968, was oriented towards Continental Marxist philosophers such as Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, and more notably, Antonio Gramsci. In addition, scholars were informed by semiotics as a way of comprehending communication and media texts, and understood mass communication as a circulation of cultural signs in a social context or as a social production of meaning (Jensen 1991:137). Furthermore, they placed a particular

emphasis on the media texts and the meaning-making practices in which media texts are entangled in.

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model was introduced in 1973 as a working paper (CCCS Stencilled Paper no. 7), entitled 'Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse'. It can be viewed as a critical response to the then-dominant tradition in media research: the positivist, empirical tradition of US effects research.²³ In the paper, Hall investigated the relationship between the mass media and the audience, and he presented the notions of encoding and decoding. They describe how both the sender and receiver participate in the process of communication. Hall's main arguments were that television programs are encoded essentially according to certain social and cultural perceptions that give them a particular intended meaning, which become actualized through a preferred reading carried out by viewers. The intended meaning is not necessarily shared by the various social and cultural formations of TV viewers, who decode the content of the message in line with their background and social and cultural context. In short: a television program encodes a certain representation of 'the world' with ideological values in which a preferred meaning is inscribed, but it may well communicate a different meaning, if decoded otherwise than the way in which it has been encoded. Consequently, the text should, according to Hall, be viewed as a structured polysemy. That is to say, it more or less dictates how the interpretation should be, while simultaneously remaining open to interpretations (Morley 1992:86).

Following Hall (1980), there is no necessary 'fit' between the encoding and the decoding processes in the communication chain. It is this lack of 'fit' and transparency, and its impact on communication that the encoding/decoding model invites media researchers to investigate (Morley 1992:86). One of the best-known aspects of Hall's theory is that it postulates three different modes of reading for an audience, dependent on the viewer's

²³ In Hall's own estimation, the paper has a slightly polemical thrust, calling into question the notion of content as a performed and fixed meaning or message (Cruz and Lewis 1994:253). It was originally aimed at English communication scholars who worked in the American effects research tradition.

position in the political and ideological struggle for hegemony in society. Hall identified these as (1) the dominant-hegemonic position (the 'preferred reading'), (2) the 'negotiated' position, and (3) the 'oppositional' position. A preferred reading will take as its point of departure the ideological position that is inscribed in the TV message. Hall (1980:136) explained that negotiated readings accord a "privileged position to the dominant definitions of events while reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to local conditions." In a reading from an oppositional position, the viewer understands the preferred meaning being constructed, but "retotalizes the message within some alternative framework of reference" (Hall 1980:138). Hence, Hall's model opened up for different readings of the same TV message, while simultaneously linking this to an ongoing hegemonic struggle. Indeed, the structured polysemy of TV texts makes each particular reading a political and ideological contest between dominant and subordinated meanings.

At the time, some of the key arguments in Hall's paper were considered unorthodox and radical by media researchers – for instance, the ideas that TV texts are characterized by a structured polysemy and that TV audiences have various reading positions. These ideas outright challenged the dominant effects research paradigm's basic presuppositions about TV texts and its audiences. Hall's model provided a semiotic alternative to the more linear communication model, the sender-message-receiver, which was the dominant model at the time. Unlike the traditional model, Hall considered it as crucial that the encoding process can be independent of the decoded meaning. In this way the model can be used at least in two ways, depending on where the emphasis is placed: whether it is on the moment of encoding, of decoding or on both (Gurevitch and Scannel 2005:240). The model also demonstrated a conviction of the text's importance and a commitment to carry out extensive qualitative textual analyses of media texts – and this was absent in the media 'effects' paradigm.

Hall's model (1980) has proven hugely influential in media studies, and more importantly in this context, it has served as a starting point for many studies that investigate media reception. Charlotte Brunson and David Morley (1978) applied Hall's model in a textual analysis of the BBC current affairs TV program, *Nationwide*. They carried out a semiotic analysis of the codes and conventions that characterize *Nationwide* for its audience, where the central aim was ideological critique. In this reader-oriented analysis, they highlighted a mixture of 'encoding' conventions, and uncovered their intended effect by investigating areas such as the presentation of current affairs topics in the program, the structure of interviews of different people, and the underlying premises of the interviews.²⁴

Arguably the most important finding of the study was the authors' discovery of the ideology the program disseminated. Morley and Brunson laid bare the program's endeavour to create the myth of a united nation – 'a nation of families'. This was achieved by omitting or suppressing the distinctions and antagonism between people that exist in British society. The study showed how *Nationwide*'s basic codes and discourses constructed a consensual, 'preferred' view, particularly through rhetorical strategies such as 'linking' and 'framing'. They made it clear that the findings would later be modified in accordance with actual audience readings of the same TV texts. In this way, they argued for the need of a dual approach that would make it possible to study both the TV message and the decoding on the part of television viewers.²⁵

In the study *The 'Nationwide' Audience* Morley (1980) brought together social-scientific and humanistic perspectives on the audience, where he meticulously tested the encoding/decoding model on actual audiences. Morley was interested in how viewers with

²⁴ In the study, Brunson and Morley took for granted that TV viewers were predetermined to accept the preferred meaning. Hence, they focused on locating the textual strategies embedded in the program which they deemed to reinforce the viewers' predisposition (Turner 1996:123).

²⁵ Hall's (1980) model, together with Morley and Brunson's work (see Brunson and Morley 1978; Morley 1980), have been an important source of inspiration for this thesis. Particularly Morley and Brunson's 'dual approach', which I have adopted and adapted for this thesis, was fruitful as a point of departure when designing the structure of this research project.

different social background: class, gender, and ethnic background, interpreted the TV program, and the work constituted an attempt to explore the range of differential decodings of *Nationwide* arrived at by groups in different socio-cultural locations (Morley and Brunson 1999:24). Morley examined audience readings by using focus group interviews, and the responses were analyzed by applying the encoding/decoding model. In his analysis of the excerpts, Morley was principally concerned with social position, particularly class determinants such as the audience's occupation group. The interviewees' reactions to the program(s) were correlated with the informants' social background. Based on the findings, Morley (1992:118) concluded that the meaning of a text "must be understood as being produced through the interaction of the codes embedded in the text with the codes inhabited by different sections of the audience."

The study can in some specifics be seen to fall short of its objectives, especially as regards Morley's conclusion that the social position to the TV viewers he examined did not correlate directly with the readings collected. The viewers' readings displayed a complexity and ambiguity that Morley probably had not foreseen.²⁶ For example, there were surprisingly few incidences of full agreement about the program within the respective social groups. It was problematic that Hall's model could not provide a good explanation for differences between cultural ideas about taste within groups.

Martin Barker and Kate Brooks (1998) are among the media reception scholars who have adopted a critical stance towards Hall's encoding/decoding model (and also Morley's endeavours to prove its usefulness). While acknowledging its wide and often unacknowledged influence in audience reception studies, they conclude that the model should be abandoned. One of their principal objections is a paradox they perceive in the model. In their view, the

²⁶ For instance, some of the bank managers agreed with the political orientation of the content in *Nationwide*, but they disliked the manner in which politics was presented. The shop stewards expressed discontent with the views the program provided of the trade union, but many in the group still appreciated the program, as it offered enjoyable and friendly relaxation. Particularly striking was the group of black students, who did not oppose the program's preferred meaning, but chose not to read the program at all.

‘social’ category functions as a protective mechanism that guards audiences against the influence of texts. If a TV viewer’s social experience adequately contradicts what a text suggests, it is identified as resistance in accordance with Hall’s model. The consequence of this is that audiences cease to be social at the moment of influence, as they now become the vulnerable audience, under the spell of the text. They also find it problematic that those who receive the ‘preferred meaning’ in Hall’s model become stigmatized, and that Hall’s conception of influence in this way bears similarity to that of the ‘effects’ model.²⁷

In hindsight Morley (1989) defended the model’s usefulness. One of its strengths, he asserted, is that it avoids “sliding straight from the notion of the text as having a determinate meaning [...] to an equally absurd, and opposite position, in which it is assumed that the text is completely ‘open’ to the reader and is merely the site upon which the reader constructs meaning” (Morley 1989:18). Furthermore, Morley asserts that the model is still relevant today and remains a fundament in the work of many media reception scholars (Press 2006:94). I would like to add, in defence of the *Nationwide* study, that the results pointed towards a connection between decoding and social background, albeit Morley could not provide an unambiguous correlation.

The encoding/decoding paradigm would in the 1980s become increasingly associated with the notion of the ‘active audience’. The encoding/decoding model’s emphasis on the role of the media as a site of struggle between incorporation and resistance was still a focal point in studies that proposed an active audience (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998:14-15). The majority of the decoding research indebted to Hall and Morley merged into the general ascent of cultural studies in the 1980s, as media scholars set out in search of audience readings of

²⁷ Another flaw in my estimation relates to the idea of a preferred reading. This idea positions the analyst in the role of an examiner who is able to locate and reveal the ‘preferred meaning’, while those whom the analyst finds to be associated with the ‘preferred meaning’ at the receiving end are presumed to be ideologically-led and easily manipulated. This implicit distancing of the analyst from certain portions of the audience/people seems in some respects to reproduce the us/them-divide, despite Hall’s intention to do the opposite.

media texts with a view to documenting that these texts were open to several possible interpretations (e.g. Hobson 1982).²⁸

A core characteristic of the various studies labelled ‘active audience studies’ was an emphasis on media as assets in other social interaction, beyond the moment of either individual or collective participation. Klaus Bruun Jensen (2012:180) points out that in this type of reception studies, media are looked upon as “resources for managing and, perhaps, challenging gender roles in everyday life for accumulating real world knowledge and, perhaps, stimulating political involvement; and for participating in and, possibly, extending the available range of cultural forms.” Prolific researchers associated with the ‘active audience’ term became during the late 1980s and 1990s criticized for having developed an exceedingly optimistic view of audiences’ ability to resist mass media’s messages (see Seaman 1992; Gripsrud 1995; Roach 1997). The work that often has been highlighted as most excessive, tended to exaggerate the polysemic nature of media texts (e.g. Fiske 1987; 1989).

The notion of the active audience is still controversial today, several decades after it came to the fore. There is still no agreement in the field as to whether this type of audience is alert, attentive and original; politically active or subversive (see Livingstone 2007). The idea of the active audience has taken further steps in more recent media reception research. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) have described the development within the field as a progression in the understanding of audiences toward recognizing that they are not just active consumers of cultural commodities, but also cultural producers and performers in their own

²⁸ Two studies of audience ‘decodings’ that have gained the status of ‘canon’ are Len Ang’s (1985) and Liebes and Katz’ (1990) investigations of the US prime time soap opera, *Dallas* (Lorimar Productions/CBS 1978-1991). Recounted very briefly, Ang’s study was based on audience self-selection. She examined the reactions of women in The Netherlands to *Dallas*. Ang recruited 42 informants through newspaper advertisements, and the answers she got came from letters submitted by viewers, predominantly from women. Among other things, the study revealed how even the female fans of *Dallas* considered the show to be ‘low culture’. Furthermore, Ang coined, based on her findings, the notion of ‘emotional realism’, which she identified as a shared reading practice among female *Dallas* viewers. In another noted study, Liebes and Katz (1990) examined the reception of *Dallas* by groups of different ethnicity in Israel, the USA and Japan, where they addressed the question of cultural imperialism. The study showed that there were clear distinctions between the groups in relation to the meaning, importance and moral judgments that *Dallas* elicited.

right.²⁹ With reference to Henry Jenkins' (1992, 1995) research into the subcultural pursuits of fandom, it is argued that media such as television and film provide resources (rather than constraints) with which interpretive communities – e.g., fans of a certain TV show – can use for their own purposes, which at times differ greatly from the intentions of the text's producers. Assertions such as these about the power that certain audiences possess are now rather common in the sub-discipline of fan studies.

Jostein Gripsrud (1995:8) has warned that writings in cultural studies that celebrate a powerful, sovereign media audience tend to imply that we have already arrived at the utopia of total self-determination in the Western world. Gripsrud reminds us that Western media audiences vary in terms of their social background, media literacy skills, cultural and economic capital and access to and knowledge about media. I, for my part, argue that not even the sub-category of fans should be considered powerful, let alone be viewed as a sovereign group of experts on popular culture (see, further Halse 2014).

²⁹ Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) claim that the encoding/decoding paradigm in media audience research is now replaced by the spectacle/performance paradigm. They argue that the former paradigm was typically preoccupied with whether the media producer or the audience possesses cultural power. The new paradigm, however, sets aside this preoccupation with cultural power in favor of conceiving the audience as performers who operate within a media-saturated society.

4. Methodology

This study of *24* and its reception combines textual and audience reception analysis. In this chapter I will discuss the methodological choices for my articles, with an emphasis on how the two methodological approaches that I utilize have contributed, each in their own way, in exploring the main research question. Furthermore, I elaborate on some of the strengths and weaknesses of the methodologies. But I will first discuss the reasons for why I chose Norway as a focal point for the gathering of audience reception data.

4.1 Norway: a preferred site to gather data

The research project is located in Norway, and in the reception analysis articles a majority of the informants who contributed the empirical data originate from this country. However, data were also collected from informants who are located mainly in the United States (i.e. online fans on the official *24* discussion forum), and from Muslim immigrants living in Norway. The obvious reason for choosing Norwegian informants for the two empirical audience studies was its practicality, particularly in the article that relates to focus group-interviews. Furthermore, it can be of advantage for me as a researcher to study audiences from a culture of which I have a first-hand experience. Consequently, my interpretations of the gathered data were hopefully less inhibited by cultural barriers. Another reason is that by selecting another country than the one the serial is primarily oriented towards and preoccupied with, viewers will arguably have a more distanced relation to the social and political context and put more focus exclusively on the text.

Regarding the sources of data in the reception analysis articles, I have chosen to study mainly young adults. In the following I will explain the main motives for selecting this age-group. I operationalize the term ‘young adults’ as comprising people in the age demographic of 17-29 years. The selection is based on Thomas Ziehe’s (1993) discussion of conceptions of

youth in Western societies. On the basis of the discourses on biological youth, Ziehe posits that ‘youth’ in this sense is loosely considered to last until one is 17 years old. In contrast, he defines the culturally youthful as those whose lifestyles are like young people’s. In Western discourses, ‘cultural youth’, is loosely estimated to last until one is 27-29 years old. Also, the age demographic 17-29 years largely corresponds to *24s* target audience. Data from a survey in the United States by *Nielsen TV Ratings* in *24’s* season 7 showed that *24* and *Fox Television* had the highest ratings among 18- to 34-year-olds on the evenings *24* was aired (see Seidman 2009).

Norwegian TV channels today dedicate a large part of their broadcast schedule to popular US TV entertainment. Additionally, providers of on-demand Internet streaming media, such as *Netflix*, contribute in making US entertainment a preferred option in Norwegians’ daily media consumption. US TV serials and their stars are discussed and commented upon by journalists, commentators and media hosts on a daily basis and comprise an important portion of the popular media output in Norway. This entertainment is also the centre of attention for fans and ordinary viewers in a growing number of Norwegian internet sites dedicated to audience interaction and participation.

Despite the considerable presence of US TV serials in the Norwegian cultural landscape and in people’s everyday life, little research has been carried out on popular US TV shows and their relation to Norwegian viewers since Gripsrud’s *The Dynasty Years* (1995),³⁰ a study of the prime time ‘soap opera’, *Dynasty* (*Aaron Spelling Productions/ABC* 1981-1989). Gripsrud utilizes evidence from Norwegian audience survey results, newspaper and magazine clippings and letters from avid Norwegian fans to broadcasters,³¹ as he sets out to

³⁰ Another study on how Norwegian TV audiences engage with television content produced in another country is Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore’s (2009) PhD thesis on audience engagement with television comedy in Norway and Britain, with a focus on the role of gender and nationality.

³¹ Gripsrud interpreted 144 letters that had been sent to the *NRK* broadcaster by viewers. Most of these had been written by female fans of the show with lower cultural capital. In his discussion of the audience data in the concluding part of the chapter, Gripsrud (1995:160) asserts that: ”Nothing encountered in the analysis of

examine the show's production, textual content, reception and context. His monograph centres on *Dynasty* as a cultural and political phenomenon. The show's production is discussed in the part that focuses on the United States and Hollywood; in the second part the focus shifts to Norway and *Dynasty's* reception there. The third and final part contains in-depth textual analyses of eight selected episodes of the serial.

Gripsrud interprets the soap opera as an artefact of the internationalization of culture and a changing relationship between elite and popular culture in Norway. Because of the specific political and cultural situation in Norway in the 1980s, *Dynasty* became both immensely popular and widely and critically debated. Norwegian viewers had not previously been exposed to this kind of glossy, extravagant, big budget and melodramatic TV entertainment. At the same time, the serial was controversial – particularly among the cultural elite. Gripsrud discusses why the soap opera became viewed with such scepticism by scholars, intellectuals and the cultural establishment in general. Accordingly, it was perceived as an icon of the *Zeitgeist*, of the period when commercialization of the Norwegian media was gaining ground.

24 was one of the most popular US television serials among Norway television viewers of the past decade. Still, the impact the serial had in Norway is hardly comparable to that of *Dynasty* in the 1980s. The articles I have written thus have a different point of departure and ask different research questions than those in Gripsrud's study.

Since 2002, all seasons of *24* have been broadcast in prime time on *TV2* – the leading commercial broadcast channel in Norway, with a market share averaging between 20-25 percent during the years *24* was broadcast (*Medienorge* 2014). *24* was a commercial success for *TV2* in terms of audience ratings, and according to TNS Gallup the serial had

reception, except the refusal to watch, seriously contradicts or otherwise challenges the ideas and intentions of the producers of the show. (...) No convincingly 'subversive' or 'aberrant' readings were discovered." Hence, his findings goes against the grain of the type of audience research and theory that were prevalent in the late 1980s/early 1990s, where audiences were viewed as being free to make of media content almost what they will (e.g. Fiske 1989).

571,000 viewers per episode in Season 1 and 2, aired in 2002-2003 (*VG* 26.11.2003). This means that almost every second viewer who was watching TV at that time of day was watching *24*. Audience ratings in the United States were remarkably stable, averaging between 11 and 13 million throughout (Morey and Yaquin 2011). However, among Norwegian viewers *24* dropped in popularity toward the end of its run. For example, ‘only’ 438,000 viewers watched the two first episodes of Season 7, in January 2009 (*Stavanger Aftenblad* 27.1.2009).

4.2 Textual analysis

Textual analysis is commonly regarded as qualitative research, as it is based almost exclusively on critical interpretation (see Creeber 2006:26). The aim of studies using this method is to discover the text’s potential meanings through detailed close reading. This approach for the most part consists of the scholar systematizing his or her observations in order to reach a unified understanding of the text. Thus, a textual reading carried out by a scholar is more systematic, analytic, comparative, and (should be) less biased than an ordinary television viewer’s reading (Livingstone 1998:121). In the course of the analysis, the analyst asks questions of the text to explore its perceived dimensions regarding what he/she would like to obtain in-depth knowledge about. Still, textual analysis is not a technique that can be defined in terms of a singular, simple procedure. Instead, the procedure should be guided by the researcher’s main objective and the defining features of the text at hand (Østbye et al. 2007:66).

There has been a good deal of debate in media studies about where the ‘true’ meaning of a text resides. Can it be found in the text itself, or is it instead derived through readers or viewers’ interpretation? My position is that it can be found in both places, and that separate analytical practices can yield valid and insightful, but different knowledge of the meaning(s)

in a text. Hence, this thesis advocates the interrogation of selected television texts from dual or multiple perspectives. It entails, on the one hand, that I read the chosen texts – in this case a program of serial fiction – and, on the other, that actual audiences of the serial discuss and interpret the same texts. One should bear in mind that the second approach, too, involves a researcher’s analysis of audience statements. Thus, the approach consists of two separate, but somewhat related analytical procedures. The textual analysis showcases aspects regarding *24* which the audience members may or may not be aware of or do not have the knowledge of, and vice versa.³²

It is often expected in textual analyses of a television show that an explanation of the selection of the given material be provided (e.g., the episode(s) and season(s) to be analysed). Gripsrud (1995:201) describes his selection of episodes from *Dynasty* in the following way: “(...) the material should at least approach the quantity and complexity required of the representative (...) I have chosen to concentrate on episodes broadcast during the serial’s first run in Norway, not least since that is the period from which most of my reception data stem.” Yet, in the present textual analyses of *24*, it was not essential that the selection be representative of the serial as a whole. The reception data were gathered after the textual analysis was done, and the study corresponded to the selected texts.³³ My objective is to investigate Muslim characters in *24*, and these characters are portrayed in four of *24*’s eight seasons. I examined Muslim characters in three of them and purposively selected characters that in terms of their position in the serial’s narrative and their relation to other characters embody important aspects and developments concerning *24*’s portrayal of Muslims.³⁴

³² In the analysis of characters in moving-image storytelling such as *24*, meaning is created on several levels, both in and around the text. This meaning lies in structures, as a ‘fabric’ of images and sound in a text. In textual analysis this is interpreted by an individual who may almost be regarded as a ‘viewer by profession’ (cf. Jerslev 1999:11).

³³ I argue that it is beneficial that scholars first obtain systematic knowledge of the text before studying audience reception.

³⁴ Muslim characters do not figure in every episode of any given season in *24* (except Nadia Yassir in Season 6), as the great majority of them reside in the fringes of the narrative.

Furthermore, I did not analyse complete episodes. Instead, my strategy was to examine the storylines that centre on the chosen Muslim characters. These span across numerous episodes in a season. In a typical episode of *24* four or five stories are told simultaneously, albeit in this textual analysis I examined only one of these stories at a time. Consequently, the textual analysis penetrated the serial's original manner of storytelling which focuses on the organization and style of the narrative. In *article 1* I examined the storyline relating to the Araz family (Season 4), and the crux of the analysis in this article centres on whether – and if so, in what respects – the representation of the family is stereotypical. In *article 3* I studied the storyline of Nadia Yassir (Season 6) and of Omar Hassan (Season 8), and here, my analysis focuses on how Muslim counter-stereotypes operate in *24*'s text, and key characteristics of these counter-stereotypes.

I employed narrative analysis in my readings of Muslim characters in *24*. Narrative analysis is an attempt to read, comment upon, and interpret a text the way it present itself through narration (Lothe 2003:21). This form of textual analysis is a flexible tool, and is useful for analysing elements of storytelling common in a range of media texts across a wide range of media platforms. A narrative normally begins with the presentation of a situation, a setting, the main characters, the building of a conflict, etc. The situation at the beginning is gradually transformed by a series of events and actions, until a new situation is established, and the story ends (Larsen 2012:138). The viewer receives information about the story world mainly from a narrative's presentation of different events and characters. Characters within the story world can produce information about the fictional universe and themselves through verbal communication and the visual images they convey, or through their actions. The textual analyses I carried out were oriented towards particular kinds of characters in *24*'s storylines, namely, those identified as Muslims. In the analyses, I paid close attention to the

‘functioning of events’ in which the characters in question are presented,³⁵ and to the character delineation. In US television shows Muslim characters have traditionally been linked to certain plot courses in a storyline, and these courses have arguably contributed in composing a stereotypical image of them.³⁶

My study of Muslim character delineations has profited by utilizing analytical distinctions between characters with different qualities and functions in a narrative. Stereotypes in media fictions are a particular sub-category of a broader category of fictional characters, the type (Dyer 2002:12). The type is any character constructed through the use of a few immediately recognizable and defining traits, which do not change or ‘develop’ through the course of the narrative and which point to general, recurrent features of the human world. In contrast, the novelistic character is defined by a multiplicity of traits that are just gradually revealed through the course of the narrative. Thus, it may be said to be the opposite of the type. Novelistic characters are privileged over the type, because Western society privileges the individual over the mass or collective.

In Dyer’s explanation of types, he makes a distinction between what he calls social types and stereotypes. Types are instances which indicate those who live by the rules of society; social types, and those whom the rules are designed to exclude; stereotypes (Dyer 1977:29). In fiction, social types can be used in a much more open and flexible way than can stereotypes. They can figure in almost any kind of plot and have a wide range of roles there (Dyer 2002:15). Dyer’s typology proved fruitful as an analytical tool when I examined

³⁵ The term ‘functioning of events’ refers to those qualities of an event that gives it certain purposes and effects – especially in relation to the text’s subject matter. On that account, the functioning of events is closely associated with the characters in the text, as they tend to set things in motion in regards certain goals or wishes (Lothe 2003:114).

³⁶ Shaheen (1984:116) present the following explanation of why Muslims and Arabs to a large extent only have minor roles as ‘bit part characters’ and ‘extras’ in US TV shows. After having conducted extensive interviews with the men and women who decide what will be seen on US television, he arrived at the conclusion that US television’s portrayal of Muslims and Arabs was marked by the fact that the professionals he spoke with knew very little about them, and that their comprehension to a vast degree was based on knowledge obtained from American media. An aspect concerning the casting of Muslim characters in *24*, is that many of these characters are inconsistent with the actors’ background – i.e. the actors are not Muslims nor do they originate from the Middle East.

various Muslim characters in *24*'s storylines, as it enabled me to distinguish between the novelistic character, the social type and the stereotype. An additional tool which I applied in analysis is iconography. The way a majority of the Muslim characters are represented in *24* can arguably be described by iconography – a kind of short hand based on rules and conventions that are taken for granted. Iconography places a character quickly and economically (Dyer 1977:32). To employ iconographic codes tend to be highly useful for television serial writers, producers and directors, as the codes enables them with simple measures to incorporate a character immediately into a storyline's course of action. I used iconography as an analytical tool for examining to what degree *24*'s image of the selected Muslim characters corresponded with iconographical codes of how Muslims are commonly represented in Hollywood's films and television shows.

4.3 Reception analysis

Reception analysis emerged as a substantial addition to the media research arsenal during the 1980s, and doing this type of research came into fashion. The approach has its roots in literary reception theory, uses and gratifications research, and cultural studies and Hall's encoding/decoding model. Many empirical investigations using qualitative methods to find out how audience interpretation of given texts happened in practice were carried out in reception studies' heyday in the 1980s and early 1990s. Since the 2000s, however, studies applying this analytical approach – those that engage with the contexts of use as well as those investigating audience decodings – seem to have lost their prominence in the field. They are today rather few. As Klaus Bruhn Jensen (2012:177) observes, reception studies may have made their point – in the eyes of both text centred and behaviour-oriented colleagues. In general, the point of reception analysis is often viewed by media scholars as being to critique

the assumptions of strong media effects, as reception analyses tend instead to underline the power of the audience to construct meanings (cf. Livingstone 1991).

Research on audience interpretations of media texts – e.g., TV series, film, radio and TV newscasts or print fiction – is the most common approach within reception analysis. This type of analysis is often referred to as decodings research (for overviews, see Jensen 2012; Schröder et al. 2003a). One basic premise is that audiences actively interpret media messages. Therefore, it is not only a question of how the content influences an audience member, but also what meanings he or she brings to the text.

Reception analysis has repeatedly documented that quite different interpretive strategies are used on the same media texts by various audiences. The interpretive communities are dependent on specific contextualized frames of affective and cognitive comprehension, e.g., a fan community of a specific American TV serial. Many scholars who examined media reception in its heyday tended to focus primarily on television audiences. Hence, it is understandable that Sonia Livingstone (1991:286) characterized the approach as being centred on the viewers' active negotiation of meaning in relation to television programs. But, media reception analysis goes considerably beyond studying TV and its audiences, especially since a good share of the discussion that focuses on popular media content today takes place in online environments.

A much-used and cited definition of reception analysis is that it is applied as a joint term for the “interpretations, decodings, readings, production of meanings, perceptions, and understandings viewers have of a program” (Höijer 1990, cited in Hagen 2000:97). In reception analysis of media content, interviews – whether focus groups or the more standard in-depth research interview of individuals – have been the most frequently applied method. The individual interview enables the researcher to probe, to ‘mine’ rich material by going ‘in depth’ and to elicit spontaneity and reflection in the interview situation. The focus group

interview is a more or less informal discussion, led or moderated by a trained facilitator, often the researcher. In a reception analysis the method allows the researcher to observe how a certain audience creates meaning from media through conversation and interaction with each other. Focus group interviews also offer ways of eliciting, stimulating, and elaborating audience interpretations (Hansen et al. 1998).

The first reception analysis article (*article 2*) investigates informants' readings based on their ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The focus group interview was preferable, as it sheds light on media reception in the context of interpretive communities. The majority of the focus groups were formed on the basis of pre-existing social groups, which allowed for a permissive atmosphere during the discussions, a feature that made it easier for groups to discuss this topic in an informal way. Attitudes, perceptions and meanings are seldom formed in a social vacuum. They are formed through interaction with others. The focus interview can 'tap' into these social processes and the participants' patterns of thought (see Krueger 1994:10). Because of this 'tapping' quality, the focus group interview suited this study well. However, one problem with focus group interviews is that one or another member of the group can dominate the conversation to the extent that they distort the audience data, especially when these individuals have extreme or otherwise unrepresentative views.

The groups consisted of young adults (17-29) recruited from a high school and an immigrant centre in Norway.³⁷ During (and before) a focus group-interview value-laden terms like 'Muslim', 'terrorist', and 'Islam' were not used by the moderator. It was assumed that this might influence the informants' readings. A possible disadvantage with choosing a setting where groups of students recruited from school classes are interviewed at their school, is that this context may invite, and possibly also reinforce, politically correct answers.

³⁷ After each interview session participants had to fill out a questionnaire with questions about, among other things, their age, what they like/dislike about *24*, and their favourite television serials.

Empirical reception research suggests that actual readings are often more complex than Hall's encoding/decoding model is able to reveal. In retrospect, Morley (1992) has also criticized the one-dimensional conception of decoding as basically a question of the reproduction of a dominant ideology, as he underlines that media reception scholars also need to study basic comprehension and pleasurable media experience. To take account of these dimensions, I have chosen to employ Kim Schröder's (2000, 2003b) 'multidimensional model of mass media reception' as a research design for *article 2*. The multidimensional model deals more profoundly with the complexity of actualized readings to audiences. It ensures that each dimension of media reception receives analytical attention in its own right (Schröder 2000:254), which is important for providing an answer to the article's research question. The model includes five general and fundamental dimensions of reception: *motivation, comprehension, discrimination, position and action*. In accordance with the heuristic intention Schröder has for his model, the *discrimination* dimension was left out. Interestingly, the informants showed few signs of an awareness of the 'constructedness' of the text in their readings of *24*.

The other reception analysis article (*article 4*) focuses on online fans' perceptions and readings of positively depicted Muslims in *24*. The study includes a comparison of how two online fan communities, one in the United States and one in Norway, perceived counter-stereotypical Muslims, and an analysis of these online fans' readings was carried out. Comparing two online fan communities from different parts of the West can yield knowledge and insight on potential cultural and social variations in fans' semiotic practices. In contrast to *article 2* and Schröder's (2000, 2003b) model, *article 4* was not based on the theoretical underpinnings of Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model. Instead, I applied Jenkins' (1992, 1998, 2006) adaptation of Michel De Certeau's (1984) rather vague notion of 'poaching' – a model which underlines the process of making meaning and the fluidity of popular

interpretation (Certeau 1984:34), in contrast to the encoding/decoding model, which implies that popular meanings are rooted and classifiable.

Data were gathered from two online fan community discussions, and an analysis of threads containing readings of the selected Muslims from fan-discussions, was presented. An advantage of gathering data from online discussion forums is that one can study naturally occurring discussions and interpretation of media content without the ‘inference’ that a researcher’s presence can cause. From a reception researcher’s point of view, online sites where media content is debated are an easily accessible and low-cost source of data. They can function as impromptu focus groups which can reveal deeper cultural processes of interpretive communities. Recent debates in social research, however, have addressed some limitations in the ‘found’ digital data approach. Christine Hine (2011:569), for example, denounces studies of online fan for not providing information about the people who take part, and the ways in which group participation corresponds with other aspects of the participants’ lives.

On the other hand, an additional incentive for gathering data from online discussion fora, is that it allows the researcher to observe an ongoing interpretive community. The discussions are open for the public to access, scrutinize, and to participate in (I did not participate in the discussion forums, as this might have affected the data gathered there). One should be aware, however, of a potential source of error in commercially driven discussion forums associated with major US TV shows, e.g. *Fox*’ official *24* site: some postings may in fact be ‘professional’ content, produced by copywriters hired to create and stimulate discussions over new topics that are beneficial to the TV producers, or just to keep the ‘buzz’ going. The commercial discussion sites are also intermittently marked by censorship, as they tend to be policed and scrutinized by moderators (and at times the TV producers), looking out for the company’s interests.

The online data gathered for *article 4* derive from all the posts in the discussion forum on *24's* official website and the discussion forum, *diskusjon.no*, containing one or more of the following names: 'Hassan', 'Omar', 'Nadia' and 'Yassir'. The sample consisted of postings from the start of Season 6 in the United States on *Fox* in January 2007, to the airing of the serial finale in Norway on *TV2* in July 2010. In total the data comprised 1,499 postings from the US discussion forum and 127 postings from the Norwegian forum – all in all, approximately 350 pages of comment. Presented with an unruly material, I reduced the data and made it more relevant for the article's research question. This was accomplished through condensation, and furthermore, ordering the material by priority (see Gentikow 2005:118). The second step was to categorize the data. I carried this out in accordance with Kathy Charmaz' (2003:258) proposal to code the emerging data by creating codes simultaneously with the study of the data. The main point of this procedure is to let the researcher's interpretation of data shape the emerging codes. Consequently, the online fan data were defined and coded into four main categories: complaints, praise, progressive/reactionary tendency, and ironic/humorous tenor.

5. Key findings and conclusions

The overarching research question addressed in this thesis is: *how are Muslim characters represented in the television serial 24, and to what extent is the perception of these characters determined by the cultural and ethnic belonging of the audience?* This formulation denotes a study that involves scholarly interpretive practice(s), where the aim is to uncover the meanings of the Muslim characters' representation, and moreover, the meaning making practices of actual audiences of *24* regarding these characters. Hence, each of the four articles emphasizes different dimensions of analysis and interpretation, and all have as a focal point how *24*'s text represents selected Muslim characters. Moreover, the articles draw on different theoretical perspectives and introduce new approaches to the study of stereotypes and counter-stereotypes in television texts.

In the following I will summarize and elaborate on the key findings of the four articles in relation to each other and in relation to the thesis' main research question. Finally, I will discuss the contribution this thesis makes to the research field of media studies, where I particularly emphasize the new perspectives and knowledge it contributes to the study of stereotypes in media texts.

5.1 Drawing boundaries between 'us' and 'them'

National identity often involves a process of exclusion. My first article uncovers how this can be the case by applying a close reading of the storyline of the Muslim family Araz in Season 4 of *24*, where the idea of an American Muslim family is demonstrated to be a contradiction in terms. Disloyal to the land that enriched them, the Araz family is furthermore represented as incapable of sustaining familial bonds among themselves. Stereotypes often become a focal point of protest, of dissatisfaction with a certain group's position, even their presence, in a country. It is said that after the 9/11 attacks on the United States, resident Muslims and Arabs'

position in the country were weakened, and their reputation suffered. Several studies have documented how these groups became a target of negative stereotyping during the first decade of the 2000s in Hollywood's films and TV shows (see Shaheen 2008; Morey and Yaquin 2011; Prince 2009).³⁸ The first of my articles presents an in-depth textual analysis of the controversial storyline that first brought *24* under fire for perpetuating negative images of Muslims.

Season 4 introduces the storyline of a 'sleeping' terrorist cell in the guise of an ordinary Muslim family living in Los Angeles. This theme features in ten of the 24 episodes of Season 4. Initially portrayed as a typical 'Westernized' middle class family, they turn out to pose a deadly threat to their community and the nation. The serial and the storyline were attacked by various Muslim interest groups (particularly *CAIR*) in both US and international media for portraying Muslims in a way that fuelled intolerance and prejudice. The critics got wide media coverage, and this may have created problems for those responsible for *24*, as their response to the critics was immediate. This was the principal reason for my choice to focus exclusively on this storyline in both articles 1 and 2. Despite the controversy, the creators of *24* maintained that they would not alter their depiction of the family, as they found it 'balanced' (see *article 1*).

The analysis documents a change in the Muslim stereotype in US TV entertainment after 9/11 regarding the stereotype's relocalization to the United States. The new Muslim stereotype resembles the average American in appearance, which, in effect, redefines 'the Muslim Other'. On the outside it differs from the traditional Muslim stereotype, but within, in character, it remains true to type. In the analysis, I uncover the bifurcated construction to the new Muslim stereotype, a split in the structure that suggests that the traditional Muslim

³⁸ Stephen Prince (2009:237) states that the effort by the Bush administration post 9/11 to convince members of the entertainment industry to tailor media representations of terrorism in ways that benefited the Bush administration's engagement with the 'War on Terror' appears to have found its greatest success in television programming.

stereotype has metamorphosed into a more sinister image. This new version of the stereotype cannot be stereotypically confined. No longer recognized by established visual codes, the Hollywood image of Muslims has now become more uncontrollable. In his analysis of post 9/11 depictions of Muslims and Arabs in US television, however, Shaheen (2008:45) asserts that little has changed since 1984 with respect to this stereotype; he does not discuss this new visual trait in *24* – a trait that is also present in other US TV shows like e.g. *Sleeper Cell*, *The Grid*, *The District* (Cinemaline Productions/DiNovi Picture/CBS 2000-2004), and, in the last decade *Homeland* (Teakwood Lane Productions/Fox 21/Showtime Networks 2011-).³⁹

My close reading suggests that *24* contributed in upholding the notion of national identity when the United States was challenged by the threat of Islamic terrorism. With the Araz' storyline the serial helped to create and keep in view the idea that Muslims from the Middle East do not belong. Anthony Giddens (1983:195) defines nationalism as “a strong psychological affiliation with an ‘in-group’ coupled with a differentiation from, or reject of, ‘outgroups’.” The analysis shows how *24* representation of the Muslim family is linked to Said's (1995) Orientalism discourse, in the sense that *24* was policing the symbolic boundaries of national identity – and hence assisted in defining the composition of a national culture through imagined constructions of difference. An important finding is how this becomes connected to the analysis in *article 2* of the reception of the serial by ordinary audiences in Norway, as *article 2* highlights the importance to the television viewers' negotiation process of categorization of those belonging to the ingroup and those to be warded off as outgroups.

TV serials can have the potential to play a part in fixing or changing the positions of different groups in contemporary societies. The controversy of the storyline concerning the Araz family illustrates the fact that a television portrayal of Muslims can be deemed a threat

³⁹ Shaheen does not apply textual analysis/close reading in his work on Arab and Muslim stereotypes in Hollywood entertainment (see Shaheen 1984, 2001, 2008). Instead, he provides short descriptive summaries and evaluations of a large amount of TV shows/films.

to intergroup relations. *Article 2* examines how various interpretive communities of young adults in Norway read and perceive 24's portrayal of this family, and by doing so, it provides documentation of how this text can mobilize stereotypes and facilitate stereotyping among viewers. The close reading of the Araz family storyline lays a foundation for the present audience reception analysis. The analysis reveals that an important contribution to the fear that 24's new Muslim stereotype evoked in the ethnic Norwegians was related to the challenge and tension it created in the negotiation process of categorization. These viewers seemed uncertain of the characters ethnicity and status, but once categorized as Muslims by a member of the focus group, the labelling act triggered a powerful response, and the conversation veered off in a xenophobic direction. This exemplifies how an interpretive community modified its perception of the stereotype through socially patterned readings.

There was a notable distinction in how different people were divided into groups in the interpretative communities' readings of the TV show, depending on who defined the group. The ethnic Norwegians would most frequent label the Muslims and the people they associated them with as 'the foreigners' – as an unspecified, homogeneous outgroup, while most of the Muslim informants seemed to regard 'Americans', whom they held responsible for creating the show, as a more specific outgroup. The ethnic Norwegians operated with a larger 'Western' ingroup, which included both Americans and Europeans. Both ethnic Norwegians and Norwegian Muslims applied Muslims as a group label; for Norwegian Muslims it was a natural ingroup label whereas the Ethnic Norwegians used it as a specific outgroup label. Thus, in this negotiation process of categorization, the different focus groups used very broad categories when labelling characters which they identified in the text, and for that matter, outside the text in the world around them.

Stereotyping attempts to deny flexible thinking with categories, as a stereotype should be viewed as an erroneous category. A troublesome aspect of the new Muslim stereotype's

impact on Western TV audiences is how it enables one to make sharp boundary definitions. The vast and heterogeneous category, 'Muslim' is clearly insufficient for the purpose of labelling potential Islamic terrorists.

An important function of stereotypes is to construct limits and police the boundaries of what is by common sense understood as 'normal' and 'natural'. This study suggests that the new Muslim stereotype cannot easily be stereotyped and thus confined to the other side of the border. For instance the ethnic Norwegian viewers in the study seemed uncertain as to the ethnicity and status to the characters, probably because their appearance did not resemble traditional Muslim stereotypes. The new Muslim stereotype resides in major US cities and is camouflaged by Western lifestyle and appearance; therefore, the Muslim Other seems now to a greater extent to pose a threat to US values and identity – and, as the readings of ethnic Norwegians' suggest, to Western society in general. Moreover, in line with Morley (1980), the study's findings indicate that the generation of meaning through the interaction of a television text such as *24* and different groups of viewers is a struggle over meaning, and that its outcome can be difficult to predict for a researcher.

5.2 A difference that made no difference

In the aftermath of the airing of Season 4 (2005) and the subsequent criticism of *24*'s rendering of Muslims, the serial's reputation was perhaps somewhat damaged in the eyes of some segments of its audience. Moreover, it was likely that the serial in the latter part of the 2000s had to adapt to a changing political climate in the United States, as it seemed no longer to be to the show's advantage to be associated with the Bush administration and its 'War on Terror'. The producers, directors and writers of *24* changed their approach to portraying Muslims in Season 6 (2007). Despite the inclusion of the casual, 'stock in trade' Islamic terrorists for the season, the show was more ambiguous in its representation. The efforts

directed towards achieving a more balanced portrayal resulted in the introduction of Muslims into regular cast – playing characters depicted in a more positive light.

In *article 3* I investigate the show's effort to rebuff allegations of stereotyping by the inclusion of counter-stereotypes. In the article I describe counter-stereotypes as characters that are members of a stereotyped group but have traits that are the opposite of the stereotype. Racial counter-stereotypes belong commonly to the middle or upper-middle class, have prestigious jobs, are combating the villains, and are usually the main characters. I explore the counter-stereotype as a conceptual term by applying it in the analysis relating to two specific Muslims from the Middle East. The way the characters seemingly are portrayed contrasts with how Muslims from the Middle East are commonly rendered in Hollywood entertainment. As previously stated in chapter 3, a key trait of the counter-stereotype is the appropriation of white standards. The two characters that I examine are personifications of success, a President and a Leader of a major government agency, respectively. This would seem to signal that the serial had moved away from the more ideologically one-sidedness of their Muslim images, as the delineation appears ideologically conflicted. But despite *24*'s reorientation, my close reading reveals that these Muslim characters fall short in comparison to their 'white' equals – both in conducting their duties and in foreseeing events as their white US counterparts do. I argue that the representation of the characters is guided by the hegemonic point of view in line with the fixity that exists in relation to how the racial and cultural Other is perceived in Western discourse, even as the United States and Hollywood accordingly have entered the so called 'postracial' era. The textual analysis shows how the positive portrayals of Muslims do not come across as credible, especially when rendered as though their cultural background did not exist. Moreover, my analysis suggests that the issue of a more nuanced, substantial and balanced delineation of Muslims in *24*, as was alleged in the media by *24*'s producers, writers,

and the actors who played the roles, did not tackle the issue of the symbolic modes of television representation.

Based on this study, which amongst other things, exposes the flaws in the principal Muslim characters, it seemed to me a compelling and interesting endeavour – and in line with the thesis’ overarching research question – to find out how dedicated fans of the show interpreted and perceived these counter-stereotypical Muslims. *Article 4* examines the serial’s online fans and their response to *24*’s attempt to introduce positive representations of Muslims. In this connection I draw on Henry Jenkins’ (1992, 1995, 1998, 2006, 2007) influential work on fan culture and in particular the concept of ‘textual poaching’, where I discuss how fans in digital mediated settings can poach texts and construct meanings that run contrary to the producers’ expressed intentions.

In this case study on two online communities which have *24* as a focal point – one in the United States, and one in Norway – I show how the fans’ readings and perception range from indifference to hostility. Far from the resistive potential of the cultural politics of fans’ textual poaching that Jenkins describes, the article argues that in digital spaces fans’ meaning-makings (which are now at the centre, having previously been located in the periphery) and their ‘poaching’ of texts can in fact be reactionary and conservative. My findings contrast starkly with the way fans are usually represented by fandom scholars as progressive, free-minded individuals that challenge the status quo. Consequently, this examination of *24*’s online fans can in some ways be viewed as a critique of certain tendencies within what has been labelled ‘active audience research’ in reception studies, and more specifically Jenkins’ much-cited work on fan culture. I am, however, in the article writing within the research field of fan studies, drawing on research on media fans. I would hence like to stress that I also find academic work carried out within this sub-discipline to be of value. Fan studies can, and do,

provide important insights and knowledge about fans' relation to certain media texts and fan culture(s).

The analysis in *article 3* concludes that *24*'s Muslim counter-stereotype is a 'difference that makes no difference'. In light of this, *article 4* provides a study of two online fan communities' reception of the Muslim counter-stereotype in *24*'s text. Findings here show that there was little evidence of an awareness by fans in their readings that the two Muslim characters might in any way be different from Hollywood's traditional depiction of the 'cultural Other'. What little evidence that existed of this, was present in some of the threads in the discussion forum on the official *24* website. There, some fan readings resisted the meaning inscribed in *24*'s text, but as I point out in the article, these fan postings were warded off by the rest of the online fan community. US fans assumed the role of 'textual gamekeepers'; the vast majority of the posts responding directly challenged, disciplined, and contained these posts, in which a few fans signalled a critical view of *24*'s counter-stereotypical characters.

The advent of Internet has seemingly enabled more reciprocal relationships between fans and television production companies, as those who create texts to some extent pay attention to fans' online readings and shape their productions accordingly. This suggests that the content in discussion forums that centres on shows like *24* can potentially influence the television serial text – highlighting the importance of scholarly study of how online fans make sense of and interpret television narratives and characters.

5.3 Concluding remarks

The examination of stereotypes in the mass media gained new ground in the 1970s, as the concept emerged as an important organising concept for research on the mass media. By the late 1980s the research on stereotypes had become so prominent in media studies that Martin

Barker (1989:206) complained that the ‘search for stereotypes’ in the media had become a small industry in its own right. By contrast, in recent decades, interest in stereotypes in media content has waned, as studying stereotypes after the 1980s became uncommon.

Scholars like Ellen Seiter (1986), Martin Barker (1989), and Steve Neale (1979) provided harsh, albeit to some degree substantial, criticism of both the concept of the stereotype and the ‘stereotype research’ carried out in media studies, where the typical approach was quantitative content analysis. I agree that this was (and still is) a research area that is very much in need of revitalization. However, in an overtly negative review of this research, Martin Barker (1989:210) asserted in his conclusion that the concept of the stereotype is useless as a tool for investigation of media texts.⁴⁰ I beg to differ. As I believe this thesis shows, the stereotype concept can indeed be a valuable tool for investigating media texts, inasmuch as it suggests and demonstrates analytical approaches that are new to field of ‘stereotype research’, inspired by stereotype theory, media reception studies, and works on the politics of representation. My research project contributes a more multifaceted understanding of the stereotype concept, as I draw on both of Lippmann’s understandings of the stereotype: both the side of the concept emphasizing the power dimension, and the other that focuses on the psychological dimension. The thesis also reveals how stereotypes/counter-stereotypes work in television serial texts, while it simultaneously shows how different interpretative communities read and perceive the same text – which, among other things, involves stereotyping.

⁴⁰ Barker’s main argument against studying stereotypes seems to be that it is unsatisfactory that the preoccupation with the notion of stereotyping depends on hostility to thinking in group terms. Furthermore, Barker criticises stereotype theory for providing an account of how we form categories and apply them that is based on that categories simply ‘assemble’ out of the balance of the influences on us, and then we seem to apply them mechanically (Barker 1989:208). Barker’s castigation of the stereotype as a research tool is refuted, however, when one, unlike Barker, distinguishes between stereotypes and categories. In line with Pickering (2001:2-3), I find it important that one should avoid viewing stereotypes as an absolute necessary component for the perceptual and cognitive organization of the social worlds we live in. Thinking in relation to categories is, on the contrary, a necessary way of organising the world in our minds.

Television serials participate in forming an arena in which boundaries between ingroups and outgroups are constructed and negotiated. In this research project, the deployment of the stereotype and counter-stereotype as analytical tools is important for shedding light on the struggle over meanings of specific representational modes, as the thesis sets out to examine how Muslim characters in *24* are represented and perceived. I find that the concepts in the discipline today are conceptually underdeveloped. A central ambition for this thesis is thus to contribute to making research on stereotypes more relevant for media studies, by offering demonstrations of how they can be applied as analytical tools for the investigation of media texts. Furthermore, by way of conclusion, I would argue that the study of stereotypes in the media and in perception can be of considerable value for the society as a whole, as demonstrated by the societal awareness post-1960 media research on negative stereotypical images of outgroups generated – especially for those that become fixed as an outgroup or into an inferior rank and judged accordingly.

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⁴¹ In the list of references I have translated non-English titles into English. These translations should not be viewed as official. They are merely suggestions of a main understanding of the subject matter of the texts in question.

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PART 2: THE ARTICLES

Article 1: The Muslim ‘terror cell’ family

The Muslim-American Neighbour as Terrorist: The Representation of a Muslim Family in *24*

“Our Arab at his worst is a mere barbarian who has not forgotten the savage. He is a model mixture of childishness and astuteness, of simplicity and cunning, concealing levity of mind under solemnity of aspect [...]. His acts of revolting savagery are the natural results of a malignant fanaticism and a furious hatred of every creed beyond the pale of Al-Islam.”

– Sir Richard Burton, a Victorian Orientalist, famous for his travels in the Middle East and for his translation of *The Arabian Nights* (cited after Tidrick 1989:83).

Films and television series from Hollywood have been accused of disseminating negative and stereotype images of Muslims and Arabs. Scholarly work on representations of fictional Muslim and Arab characters confirms that they often have been thus portrayed thus in Hollywood productions (Shaheen 1984, 2001; Semmerling 2006; Woll & Miller 1987). The TV serial *24* (*Imagine Entertainment/20th-Century Fox*, 2001-2010) does not seem to be an exception. Muslim interest groups in the United States have criticized the show for its portrayals of Muslim characters (Parry 2007; Bakhsi 2007). In addition, prominent Muslim and Arab figures like the media researcher Jack G. Shaheen (2008), the actors Shaun Majumder and Maz Jobrani, Queen Rania of Jordan, and even the Turkish embassy in the United States, share a critical view of the serial's depiction of Muslims and Arabs.⁴²

⁴² In 2008, Queen Rania criticized *24* in a video clip on *YouTube* saying she is surprised by some of the questions she has been asked about the Arab world and the Middle East; do all Arabs hate Americans? Can Arab women work? If what most people know about the Arab world and its people come from TV series like *24* and characters like Jack Bauer, they are in for a surprise. In addition, the Turkish embassy in the United States expressed a negative view on *24* because of the show's depiction of Muslims. The embassy contacted the producers of *24* regarding Season 4, according to co-creator and executive producer of *24*, Joel Surnow. This was because there were scenes with dialogue in that season which indicates the country where terrorist suspects came from (Bennett 2008).

In a typical episode of *24* four or five stories are told simultaneously, and the transitions between storylines are sharp and quick-paced, as in most contemporary US quality TV serials. However, *24* applies an innovative storytelling technique which sets it apart from the rest: a ‘realtime’ approach to programme-making, where one episode equals one hour of life in the show’s diegetic world.⁴³ This technique requires events in *24*’s narration to unfold within a twenty-four hour time frame. *24* is probably the first TV serial ever named after its storytelling technique, rather than in reference to its diegetic world. The limited timeframe affects and restricts how characters are depicted in the show.⁴⁴ Character portrayals become more a reflection on the immediate consequences of the characters’ individual and often limited actions than in serials, which are more at liberty to recount the characters’ background and development.⁴⁵ Some of the characters appear in more than one season, but the majority, especially villains (who have minor roles in the show), partake generally in only a few episodes in the course of a season. Terrorists are evil characters in *24*, and their on-screen appearances typically serve a limited number of narrative functions which they normally fulfil in the storyline. They lurk behind and set in motion sequences of terror; they kidnap, threaten, blackmail and murder. Terrorists occupy a limited space in the storyline, and are often characterized by few and distinctive traits, which makes them easily identifiable.

This paper investigates Muslim characters that constitute the enemy forces by presenting a study of a Muslim family in Season 4 of *24*. A textual analysis that penetrates the serial’s original manner of storytelling (the organization and style of the narrative) examines the storyline of the family, focusing on how they are portrayed. The crux of the analysis centres on whether, and if so in what respects the representation of the family is stereotypical.

⁴³ The 2009-2010 science fiction TV serial from ABC, *Flashforward*, is also named for its storytelling technique. The difference between *Flashforward* and *24*, however, is that *Flashforward*’s storytelling technique also refers to and has a major function in the TV serial’s diegetic world.

⁴⁴ *24*’s format is based on real time. In this way the viewer can get a sense of being able to follow characters in the storyline minute by minute. This is a time frame which restricts the program makers’ opportunity for character development, as people usually don’t change much during the course of one day.

⁴⁵ Chamberlain & Ruston (2007:23) suggest that *24*, with its demonstrative emphasis on style, and its convoluted and irresolute narrative, could be accused of elevating style over substance, sacrificing character development.

The story's plot and the family's character traits are studied in relation to various documented categories of Muslim stereotypes in Western popular culture.

Views on the stereotyping of Muslims in 24

The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee and the Muslim Public Affairs Council have accused *24* of representing Muslims in a manner that fuels intolerance and prejudice (Kanfer 2007; Parry 2007). These Muslim interest groups have protested against Seasons 4 (2005) and 6 (2007) of the serial, in which Islamist terrorists were depicted as evil villains and cultural Others'. When Season 4 was broadcast on TV stations in the United States, the serials' creators and producers met harsh criticism concerning the representation of a terror cell as an ordinary Muslim American family. Indeed, *Fox Network Television* promoted the season with the slogan, 'They could be next door.' The storyline upset many Muslims in the United States (Anon 2005; DiLullo 2007:17), and initiated a broader debate about how Muslims and Arabs are portrayed in *24*.⁴⁶ *Fox* responded to the criticism by announcing an offering of public service announcements during the season on local television stations in the United States, funded by CAIR. *Fox* cooperated with CAIR to produce spot announcements in which Kiefer Sutherland, the star of *24*, cautioned the show's viewers not to stereotype Muslims.⁴⁷

Co-creator and executive producer Robert Cochran claims that they did not alter the contents of Season 4 despite the controversy about the representation of the family as terrorists, because the representation was balanced. He explains that at the beginning of the season, it may have seemed like we were doing the 'stereotype thing', but that was not the

⁴⁶ Christian Blauvelt (2008) claims that the plot in *24* about the Muslim family works like Nazi propaganda fiction films did, like *Jud Suss* (1940) and *Der Ewige Jude* (1940), which instilled fear that people's Jewish neighbours might be working to establish a foothold in Germany for the Soviet Union.

⁴⁷ Executive producer Howard Gordon states that he became aware of the problem that "fear sells" when Season 4 was being promoted. *Fox*'s marketing department placed a giant billboard over a motorway in Los Angeles. An image of the Araz family was accompanied by the slogan "They could be next door". Gordon agrees with CAIR's assessment that "we were acting as handmaids to fear" (Gumbel 2008).

case. According to Cochran, the creators of the serial did not produce three stereotype terrorists: “One of them is unwaveringly stuck to the cause. One of them, the kid, decided it was too much when he saw someone die in front of him, [...] the mother was caught between” (DiLullo 2007:17). Co-producer and director, Jon Cassar, emphasizes the importance of portraying characters with depth. The expensive and impressive action scenes do not entirely define the serial. Cassar states that he is tired of *24* always being called an action show, because it is based on real characters, with an aim to make the villains three-dimensional: “Making the evil terrorists seem real has long been a challenge because they are real people with their own point of views” (DiLullo 2007:91).⁴⁸ Cassar believes that in Season 4 they have managed to base the enemy – i.e., the Araz family – in reality better than in previous seasons. He also explains what is scary about portraying a normal Muslim American family as terrorists:

I remember shooting the very first scene with them sitting at the kitchen table arguing about family stuff, it wasn't even about them being terrorists, and we are watching the carnage of the train wreck they cause as they are sitting there calmly eating breakfast [...] you think this could be my neighbour or the guy down the street. To me, that is much scarier than a nuclear bomb hitting LA, because you can't get your head around that (DiLullo 2007:91).

Stereotypes

Stereotypes are commonly understood as simplified, generalizing characterizations of a group of people. Walter Lippmann (1991:96) defined a stereotype as “the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights.” Two diverging understandings of Lippmann's conceptualization can be elucidated. On the one hand

⁴⁸ In response to the criticism of Season 4, co-creator and producer Joel Surnow points out that: “For it to have any believability and resonance, we had to deal with the world we're living with, with the terrorists and jihadists” (Ackerman 2005).

stereotypes are both deficient, biased, and in the interests of those who apply them. On the other hand stereotypes are a means to ensure efficient information processing. The existence and utilization of stereotypes can thus be explained and understood both from the viewpoint of the dominant forces' need to create and sustain structures of inequality and power, and from individuals' need for economizing cognitive processes.

Stereotypes operate as distancing strategies that place others so as to point up and perpetuate certain normative boundaries for social conduct, roles and judgements, thus distinguishing what is threatening and disturbing from what is regarded as acceptable and legitimate (Pickering 2001:174). A rise in ethnic and racial stereotypes usually accompanies a rise in conflict and discontent in a society. Stereotypes offer explanations of negative experiences and developments like escalating unemployment and crime rates in a society, and present mechanisms for dealing with them. Take, for example, terrorism, which increasingly has become a problem for Western countries. That most terrorists are Muslims from the Middle East is a popular truism these days. When Western media discourses represent Muslims using stereotypes, Muslims can to a greater extent be distanced from 'us'. The threat and the fear that terrorism evokes can thus be identified with Muslims, which in turn can attempt to be controlled by distinguishing Muslims as a group and reducing the group's diversity to a few observable traits they are alleged to possess.

In audiovisual fictions, media stereotypes are a particular subcategory of a broader category of fictional characters: the type. The type does not change or develop during the course of the narrative, and it points to general, recurrent features of human activity. Richard Dyer (1977:29) distinguishes between social types and stereotypes. Types are instances which indicate those who live according to the rules of society (social types) and those whom the rules are designed to exclude (stereotypes). In narratives, social types can be utilized in a much more open and flexible fashion than stereotypes. They can figure in a wide range of

plots and possess a diversity of roles. In films and in TV serials stereotype characters are efficient and economic narrative devices. When presented on screen, they spell out the category of people one is dealing with, for example by a certain body language (like mannerism and gestures) or clothing codes. Film and television creators can thus spend less time on introducing the character.⁴⁹

Research on Muslim characters in Hollywood's film and TV series

Historical and textual analyses of representations of Muslims and Arabs in US TV series and films demonstrate that they have been portrayed in a negative and stereotypical manner (e.g. Shaheen 2001, 2008; Fuller 1995). Research points out interesting historical differences in the material (Eisele 2002; Michalak 1988). Michalak examined two reference catalogues produced by the American film industry – one for films from the 1920s and one for films from the 1960s. An analysis of the themes of the films in the reference catalogues finds that even though the Middle East had changed, the Arab stereotype was still more or less the same. It also documents that Hollywood's 'Middle East' had to a stronger degree become a sinister place (Michalak 1988:32). Primary stereotypes of Muslims in Western culture can be divided into four core images: "violence, lust, greed and barbarism" (Karim 1997:157). Variations of these stereotypes in Western popular culture are that Muslims have immense, but ignoble and undeserved wealth, they are barbaric and regressive, indulge in sexual excess, and are prone to violence (Karim 2003:62; Shaheen 1984:4). Such traits have long formed the core of dominant European perceptions of Muslims and Arabs, deriving from cultural traditions dating back to the Middle Ages. The expansion of Islam into Europe in this period set Europeans against Muslims and led to Western political and cultural efforts to discredit Islam and Islamic culture.

⁴⁹ In this article the stereotype is delimited to be understood as a way of representing people, although the conception in itself, especially as an adjective, is also used to refer to ideas, behaviour and 'settings' (see Dyer 2002:17).

Jack G. Shaheen began documenting images from entertainment shows on TV in the United States in 1974, and his findings suggest that Muslim Arabs have often played the role of villains and cultural 'Others'. Shaheen (1984:4-5) lampoons the image that fits most Arabs depicted on TV with what he calls 'The Instant TV Arab Kit', which consists of a belly dancer's costume, a turban, a veil, sunglasses, flowing dresses and robes, oil wells, limousines and/or camels. Shaheen (2008) discovered a new phenomenon in the 2002/03 U.S. TV season. Here, the US network producers introduced a new threatening Arab stereotype: *the Muslim Arab-American Neighbour as Terrorist*. Shaheen has since documented over 50 programs from the culture industry in the United States which pipelines this mythology into people's living rooms. He also states that almost half of all Americans are reluctant to have Arabs or Muslims as their neighbours (Shaheen 2008:49).

In all fairness, there are also scholars who rebut with the accusation that Hollywood is stereotyping Muslims and Arabs. Daniel Mandel (2001:19-20) believes that media scholars and Muslim interest groups have lobbied vigorously and criticized in public what they believe are distortions. Mandel asserts that these critics have three key complaints: first, that Islamic violence is distorted, second that Islamic terrorism is invented, and third that Muslims and Arabs never get to appear in sympathetic roles. But, Mandel (2001:27) finds it only natural for Hollywood action films to deal heavily in stereotypes. The way in which an action film tells stories is greatly influenced by the success attained in choosing protagonists and antagonists. Mandel stresses that Hollywood's use of stereotypes usually has basis in fact. After all, he asks, are not many anti-American terrorists Muslims or Arabs?

24 and the action TV genre

24 is difficult to classify, as it appears to be a hybrid of several genres. The serial's portrayal of emotionally charged scenes, with intimate dialogues between lovers, family members or

colleagues at the Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU), makes *24* at times reminiscent of prime-time soap operas. *24*'s insistence on realism, the illusion of being broadcast live and its videographic style also draws it towards the TV genre of drama-documentary. Nevertheless, it is most likely that *24* should be categorized within the TV genre of action series/serials. Usual elements incorporated in a story in the crime genre, a sub-genre of the action series, are: a law is broken (Season 4 starts with Muslim terrorists arranging a major train collision); the authorities discover this; the hero and his colleagues try to discover why and how this happened and who is responsible. They encounter informants and villains; combating the enemy's rank and file. Ultimately, the arch-villain is revealed and defeated in a grand battle scene. After a shoot-out, the hero Bauer manages to catch the 'super-terrorist' Marwan, but he commits a martyr's suicide. A concluding sequence restores the equilibrium (Miller 2001:18). Other characteristics *24* has borrowed from the crime genre are the tension created by viewers being kept in a constant state of limited knowledge and suspense and the use of cliff-hangers before commercial breaks and at the end of each episode. Combined with other typical ingredients from action series, such as ambiguous romantic affiliations and a simplistic characterization of villains, these elements are important in defining *24*.

24 is considered a success in terms of audience ratings – the premiere of Season 6, for instance, attracted 15.7 million viewers in the United States alone (Mahan 2007). The show is also broadcast widely in other parts of the world, including the Middle East. Its success may be partly attributed to the creators of *24* having managed better than other US TV serials to fulfil viewers' post 9-11 fear-based fantasy of a macho, tough and protective hero, Jack Bauer, a man who does not hesitate from going to extremes to protect the nation from terrorism. Bauer applies controversial methods, including some that are blatantly illegal, such as torturing suspects to get information and assassinating villains after they have been disarmed. The hero's actions step over the boundaries between common conceptions of right

and wrong, and this underlines the very essence of the TV series action genre. In this TV genre violence constitutes a fundamental conflict between the masculine as an ideal and the social as a precondition, where violence and masculinity go hand in hand.

The action genre in TV serial drama is defined by the action hero – a single white man – finding his utopian independence and freedom being constantly under threat from the community, society and the law (Schubart 1997:68). The violence committed by macho heroes like Jack Bauer demonstrates an unwillingness to, and protest against, obeying the rules of society.⁵⁰ On several occasions this is to the detriment of innocent people. In Season 4, for example, he suspects his girlfriend's ex-husband, Paul Raines, of cooperating with the Muslim terrorists. After forcing his way into Raines' hotel room, Bauer beats him up and tortures him with an electrical cord from a lamp. These actions are much alike those of the terrorists he is supposed to be combating and demonstrate a shared willingness to attain the goal of stopping the enemy at all costs. This representation of the hero's detachment from accepted rules and norms in society may be understood in the context of an older hero myth, namely, the American 'frontier hero'. A common feature in the Western genre, the myth centres on conquering the wilderness and the subjugation and 'removal' of the indigenous population (Dyer 1997:32-37). Redemption of the white hero's spirit is achieved through a scenario in which he is separated from civilized life. There is a temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state, with the hero then being regenerated through the use of violence. The enemies are believed to be 'savages', who, by the combination of their blood and culture, are inherently incapable of progress or civilization. The savages commit heinous acts against civilized people, and their actions are so extreme that they defy the laws of nature. For civilized heroes there seems to be no other way than to confront them using their own methods (Slotkin 1973). The myth of the 'frontier hero' corresponds to Bauer's

⁵⁰ In Season 7, which is set in Washington DC, Jack Bauer has to testify before a Congressional committee. He is asked to explain the extreme tactics and methods he has applied when trying to prevent terror attacks from occurring.

uncompromising fight against Muslim terrorists, and Bauer frequently stresses the importance of never negotiating with them. Controversial heroes who deploy ‘dirty’ tactics (e.g. Dirty Harry) have long flourished in American popular culture. Bauer may thus be seen as a continuation of this tradition.

Major threats in Season 4

In Season 4, Muslim terrorists from the Middle East, the United States, and England are the main enemies cooperating with co-conspirators like Mitch Anderson (a white pilot who was dishonourably discharged from the US Air Force), an African-American spy at the CTU, and some nuclear physicists from China. A special type of terrorist is selected to constitute the initial threat and to carry out the first, spectacular and ‘shocking’ attack in each season. In Seasons 2, 4, 6 and 8 the threat emanates from terrorists linked to the Middle East. Season 4 differs from the others, as in this season there is not a more powerful non-Islamist force involved in the terror activities. While Seasons 1, 2 and 3 focus on an extensive and lasting threat to the United States – for example the main threat in Season 3 is a virus attack – Season 4 has no one principal threat that last the entire season. This leads the approach to storytelling used in *24* in a new direction, where the narration here moves from one threat to another. As a consequence, the intense action scenes are accentuated at the expense of informative and plot-elucidating dialogue.

Habib Marwan is the enemy mastermind in Season 4. He organizes a large network of terrorists, who are mainly recruited from the Middle East, but live in the United States as so-called sleeper cells. A series of attacks on the United States is carried out by these terror cells. Marwan features in sixteen episodes, and in the course of these he personifies a malicious form of anti-American terror. Otherwise, the faces of Muslim terrorists are seldom clearly shown on the screen. Instead, these secondary villains are typically depicted as a

depersonalized mass. Marwan provides to the viewers a junction between the terror cells and the various acts of terror. The acts of terror often function as cover operations for new and seemingly ‘even more dangerous’ terror attacks, increasing the impression of chaos. Executive producer of *24*, Howard Gordon feels that the season came to lack continuity, shifting as it did from one threat to the next:

[This season] had everything but the kitchen sink. If you actually describe what happened, it’s insane! Let’s break down the Internet to facilitate melting down the nuclear power plants, which really was a slight of hand for the stealth bomber and a series of attacks with increasing improbability (DiLullo 2007:18).

The Araz family: a plot summary

The Arazes, a Muslim family with husband (Navi), wife (Dina) and their seventeen-year-old son (Behrooz) – is one of Marwan’s sleeper cells. The family resides in an exclusive apartment in Los Angeles, where Navi runs an electronics store. They have lived in the United States for five years, seemingly living the American dream. They facilitate the acts of other terrorists mainly by delivering weapon parts and information to them. The family stands out from the rest of this season’s Islamic terrorists, as they play a key role in Marwan’s master plan to cause numerous nuclear power stations in the United States to melt down. They are introduced when having breakfast in their middle class home, as a newscast reports on a terrorist attack they were involved in. As well as discussing the attack with his family, Navi reveals that he is aware of his son’s ongoing relationship with a white American girl, Debbie, despite his disapproval of it.

During the storyline Dina kills Debbie, Navi tries to have his son killed by a fellow terrorist whom Behrooz himself kills. Navi also murders his brother-in-law and finally Behrooz commits patricide. All of this happens as the family members betray each other in

turn, and eventually Navi ends up dead and the others are captured by the hero in the series, Jack Bauer.

The barbaric Muslim

Stereotypes clip into codes and conventions associated with inclusion and exclusion. Viewers may not be like the hero, but they are certainly not like ‘the others’ (Hayward 2006:385). Navi Araz, the father, displays character traits that viewers probably neither can nor wish to be associated with. His role is that of the patriarchal despot. When his wife Dina and son Behrooz disobey or work against him and his plans, he punishes them brutally and harshly. He displays a willingness to sacrifice everything in order to carry out terror plans against the United States and is portrayed in line with the cliché of the fanatical, dedicated Muslim terrorist who will be rewarded in heaven for fighting the ‘infidels’. Navi is depicted as an enemy who seems to act in accordance with *jihad*, a concept stemming from Arabic that means “to strive or to exert oneself [in] a ‘determined effort’, directed at an aim that is in accordance with God’s command and for the sake of Islam and the Muslim ‘umma’” (Moghadam 2007:347). In Western mass media, Muslim terrorists are typically associated with jihad, and are not perceived to act according to the logic or the moral code that applies in ‘the civilized world’. Accordingly, they are viewed as deviant, barbaric people. This view has its roots in the fact that jihad connotes a worldwide war against progress and evolution in the West’s dominant discourses (Karim 1997:170).⁵¹

⁵¹ Karim employs the geographical divide ‘north/south’ instead of ‘west/east’. Here the terms ‘west/east’ are applied instead, as these are the terms generally used in relation to the notion of Orientalism.



Illustration 1: Navi takes his son as hostage and uses him for cover when Jack Bauer attempts to arrest him. Navi warns Bauer, who is holding him at gunpoint: 'Careful, you may hit the boy'.

In episode 4, Navi pats his son's head in recognition of his efforts in dealing with the girlfriend issue. In the next episode, he orders his son to be killed. These acts deviate from the logic and moral code according to which villains in Hollywood fiction usually operate. Navi's order is also the fatal turning point in the storyline about the family. When he returns home after Debbie's death, he believes that Behrooz shot her. Navi acknowledges that it must have been difficult for Behrooz, yet necessary. In the following episode, Navi deceives his wife, claiming that it is their leader, Marwan, who wants Behrooz eliminated. She cries and accuses him of letting their son be murdered. To this Navi replies that Behrooz ceased to be their son a long time ago. Living in the United States has changed him and made him a stranger. In these scenes, the father's primitive nature emerges in the degree of brutality he exerts towards his own child. It is difficult to understand Navi's order to a terrorist-collaborator to assassinate his son. The punishment appears unreasonable, illogical and extremely brutal.

The sequence where Navi uses his son as hostage (see illustration 1) reveals primitive survival mechanisms in his personality. He leads his son to a car in a parking garage, but on their way out they meet Bauer, whom Navi attempts to run over. Lying on the ground, Bauer manages to shoot out the back wheel of the car. Navi then has to find another way to escape, and his solution is to take his son as hostage and to use him as a human shield. When Bauer tries to arrest him, Navi points a gun to his son's head. Bauer relents, making their escape possible. In this scene it becomes clear that not only does Navi have a barbaric nature – he is also aware of his own unscrupulousness and uses it to his advantage in relation to people he presumes to be ethics-bound. Furthermore, one may speculate whether the background for his assumption that a white American agent is less unscrupulous than he, is an assessment he makes based on intuitive cultural knowledge. If this is the case, Navi confirms by these actions both his own and his cultural milieu's tendency to use every means to reach their goal. Navi is depicted in a manner which corresponds to the West's dominant discourses on Islamic terrorism. In these discourses the violence exercised by Muslims is considered as the worst form of terrorism. The violence is taken to be the protest of barbaric irrationality against modern civilization and to be supported by a historical tradition of fanatical violence (Karim 1997:166).

The insidious Muslim

The narrative cliché of a mother torn between her disobedient son and his despotic father, describes Dina. Ultimately, she has to choose sides. She is represented as a mother caring for her child, but this is offset by her loyalty to her husband and 'the cause'. A number of times she tells Behrooz that he needs to obey his father. When Behrooz secretly maintains contact with Debbie, Dina helps her son conceal this, to avoid his being punished by his father. Dina is involved in the acts of terror and is dedicated to the terrorists' 'cause'. She makes this clear

in her interrogation by Bauer, telling him that she would take pleasure in causing a nuclear power station to melt down.



Illustration 2. Dina after shooting Debbie's corpse.

Characterizations of Muslims and Arabs in Western TV entertainment are often rendered through visual signs such as gestures, expressions, apparel, and surroundings. The accepted visual code for 'TV Arabs' fits neither Dina nor her family who, for example, wear Western clothes. Richard Dyer (1997:63) perceives a tendency in Hollywood films for whites to be associated with the good guys, and blacks with the bad guys. Merging transitions exist between the categories of hue, skin and symbol, with white often equated with good and black with evil. A white person who is bad is failing to be 'white', whereas a black person who is good comes as a surprise, and one who is bad merely fulfils expectations. Skin colour plays an important factor in the portrayals of peoples and race in *24*. The Araz family can be recognized as Muslims originating from the Middle East through visual cues like their light

brown skin and dark eyes and hair. One auditory cue is the parents' characteristic accent. It should be pointed out, however, that the Araz family's appearance and lifestyle may be regarded as how the family disguises their double roles as Muslim terrorists. Shaheen (2001:2) asks rhetorically when was the last time that one saw a movie depicting an Arab or an American of Arab heritage as a regular person? Even though Dina is not an easily recognizable Muslim Arab stereotype in appearance, she becomes a stereotype through her bizarre actions. It does not seem reasonable, even for mothers portrayed as villains in US television entertainment, to keep their sons present, albeit unknowing while murdering their girlfriends.

In the segment where Debbie is killed, Dina is presented as combining the role of mother with that of a Muslim terrorist. Dina hands her son a gun and asks him to get it over with. Instead, Behrooz and Debbie attempt to escape, but on their way out Debbie collapses and dies. Afterwards, she expresses her great disappointment in him. Dina then shoots the girl's corpse (see illustration 2) to make it look like Behrooz has killed her, so that her husband will be pleased. In these scenes, Dina fills the traditional role of the mother as a negotiator and stabilizer in the family. At the same time she is portrayed as a stereotype, and displays traits which can be linked to several primary stereotypes of Muslims. But the stereotypical trait that is most prominent does not correspond with these: it is the stereotype of 'the insidious' Muslim. This is in line with how Muslims often are portrayed on American television; insidious Muslims as violent strangers intent on combating non-believers everywhere (Shaheen 2000:23). This stereotype may be regarded in association with how Muslims are viewed in the dominant discourses of the West; as endemically treacherous (Karim 1997:177). Dina displays a striking level of mendacity, cunning and manipulation in the way she hides and reveals things to her own family and others. She plays on her son's expectations of her as a mother, Debbie's of her as her boyfriend's mother, and Navi's of her

as an Islamic warrior and obedient wife. Dina does not live up to any of these expectations, but instead plays on them in order to betray.

The violent Muslim

The character, Behrooz, is the most ambiguous in terms of stereotypes. In many ways, Behrooz is like most teenagers in his style of clothes and activities. He is at odds with his family, with his father, the adversary, and his mother, the go-between. Nevertheless, his relations with his parents and international terrorism show a side that hardly corresponds with what most people would consider a stable and wholesome upbringing. As a fictional character, he cannot therefore be placed in the category of a 'social type', which applies to people who live according to the rules of society. He is a young man torn between two cultures and his family's participation in terrorist activities against the United States. But even when his girlfriend is sacrificed for the cause, Behrooz does not distance himself from his family, who have got him involved in terrorism. In the opening scene, his father accuses him of not having broken off his relationship with his girlfriend, Debbie. Behrooz says he has ended it, but his father replies that he listens to his son's phone calls and reads his e-mail, and therefore knows he is lying. Behrooz finds this unreasonable, but after being reprimanded he replies 'yes, sir'. In this scene, Behrooz appears to be the obstinate teenager who does not wish to obey his parents. His reply seems to indicate he obeys them only because of his father's authority. During that same day, Behrooz works against and defies his parents on several occasions, thereby resembling the stereotype of the rebellious teenager disobeying his parents.

There is a pattern in regards to when Behrooz chooses to oppose them and when he does not. For example, he does this whenever his family is discussing his girlfriend, appearing in certain scenes as a typical teenager who acts rashly and on impulse for the girl he longs for.

This side of him emerges in the scene when he hands over a suitcase to terrorists and discovers that Debbie has followed him. Instead of doing something drastic to remove her from this dangerous place, he instead in a long conversation spends time trying to sort things out between them, displaying audacity which jeopardizes both his girlfriend's life and the terror plans. However, he does not oppose his parents' terror plans and actions when the family is watching a news report about an act of sabotage that resulted in a train crash. Navi comments the news by proclaiming that what they will achieve today will change the world, and they should all feel honoured to have been chosen for this mission. To this Behrooz replies 'Yes, father'. He responds thus several times when the conversation touches upon terrorism, and not by 'Yes, sir', which he answers in situations where he displays a negative attitude.

Behrooz has characteristics which are associated with several primary stereotypes. When Behrooz is sent with a fellow terrorist to dispose of Debbie's body, he demonstrates innate violent traits. As they are digging a grave, he observes that the terrorist is concealing a gun. Because of this, Behrooz hits him repeatedly in the back of the head with a shovel until he dies. Later in the storyline, Behrooz assassinates his father by shooting him from behind. In these scenes, Behrooz appears to be someone inclined to kill his own in ways which are hardly honourable, even though the violence has been provoked. The grave-digging colleague seems to have been put out of action on the first strike of the shovel and no longer poses any threat. The CTU has already captured his father, meaning that Behrooz' act seems to be motivated strictly by vengeance. The way in which Behrooz is portrayed supports the image of Muslims as innately prone to use violence (Karim 1997:166).



Illustration 3. Debbie's mother is at the door the Araz. Behrooz covers up the murder by claiming to have the same ring tone as Debbie.

The stereotype of the rebellious teenager does not merge with the stereotype of the violent Muslim. Indeed, the Behrooz figure may be too multilayered to constitute a stereotype character, especially since he undergoes a change from obeying his father to rebel against him. The conflict between father and son reaches a climax, and ends with Behrooz committing patricide. In the season, the son is depicted as split between two stereotypes.⁵²

Still, one stereotype features more prominently than the other, and the scene in which Behrooz helps cover up the murder of his girlfriend is illustrative. When Debbie's mother visits their house in search of her daughter (see illustration 3), he helps his parents out of a difficult situation. Debbie's mother worries when she hears the sound of her daughter's mobile phone, but Behrooz covers up the murder by claiming to have the same ringtone on his

⁵² This supports Tessa E. Perkins' assertion about stereotypes: "It seems that differentiation of stereotypes is often accommodated by alternative stereotypes rather than by an expansion of the stereotype" (Perkins 1979:140).

mobile phone. In this crucial situation, Behrooz chooses to protect his parents. His representation thus seems to be most in line with the stereotyped image of a violent Muslim.

Conclusion

The makers of *24* set themselves the goal of basing the Muslim characters in reality, and with the Araz family they believe they have succeeded. This analysis of the family's portrayal, however, suggests otherwise. It shows that the portrayal is largely stereotypical; the family can be said to consist of stereotyped Muslims that fit into various categories of well-documented stereotyped images of Muslims in Western popular culture. This analysis of the storyline demonstrates that the makers of *24* hardly present a balanced portrayal. Instead, the representation draws extensively on the discourse of Orientalism. A key point made by Edward W. Said in his *Orientalism* is that the Orient is constructed through Western representations. Said regards Orientalism as a multi-faceted discourse characterized by ideas which he describes as Orientalism's most important dogmas, for example, the tenet that there is an absolute and systematic difference between the Orient (irrational, undeveloped, inferior) and the West (rational, developed, superior) (Said 1995:300-301). The systematic differences between the portrayal of Bauer, the CTU and the Araz family are in line with this discourse. On the one hand, Bauer and the CTU represent Western values and are portrayed as rational, 'developed' and superior. On the other hand, the Araz family is portrayed as irrational, 'primitive' and inferior. Still, the family's unpredictable and violent actions spread fear and cause trouble, both for their surroundings and for themselves. Their actions seem to stem from inherently destructive and barbaric impulses, as they cannot be understood either through the characters' moral persuasions or other manifest motives.

In the family, the son, Behrooz, is portrayed less stereotypically than the others. He is more complex; he undergoes a change during the day when he rebels against his father and

can thus be regarded as a stereotypical rebellious teenager. Nevertheless, this analysis indicates that his portrayal corresponds more with the stereotype image of Muslims possessing an innate violent tendency. The mother in the family, Dina, is portrayed stereotypically because she is represented as a treacherous woman who manipulates and betrays people, even those with whose she is allied. The father, Navi, is the most obvious stereotype in the family. Shaheen (2001:2) describes one of the most widespread images of a stereotype Muslim Arab in Hollywood films thus: "Pause and visualize the reel Arab. What do you see? [...] Perhaps he is brandishing an automatic weapon, crazy hate in his eyes and Allah on his lips. Can you see him?" Navi represents the prototypical 'reel Arab'. He performs extreme and violent acts against both the civilian population of the United States and his own family. The violence he commits can be interpreted and understood as opposition to modern civilization, which in *24*'s diegetic world constitutes a contrast to the irrational, primitive and brutal character traits he displays.

Modern Orientalists' observations and descriptions of Arabs' character traits include the notion that they lack discipline and the ability to cooperate:

The Arabs so far have demonstrated an incapacity for disciplined and abiding unity. They experience collective outbursts of enthusiasm but do not pursue patiently collective endeavors, which are usually embraced half-heartedly. They show lack of coordination and harmony in organization and function, nor have they revealed an ability for cooperation. Any collective action for common benefit is alien to them (Hamady 1960, cited in Said 1995:309-310).

These observations are recognizable in the Araz family. They are consistently represented as incompetent; they are unable to cooperate, whether to promote the terror cause or for the common good of the family. Instead, they consistently manipulate and deceive one another. Their collective efforts to perform acts of terror against the United States result in

conspiracies, suicide attempts and attempted murders and assassinations of close family members and fellow terrorists. This representation of stereotyped Muslims becomes paradoxical in several ways. The family members are at once mystical, primitive and ignorant; still, they show great skill in their capability to manipulate and lie in a masterly manner. In Season 4, no explanation is offered for the family's political or social motives for committing terror acts. This bears similarities to the way in which the Western news media tend to portray terrorism; the focus is typically on the act of terror and the government's reaction, not on the background for or contextual aspects of terrorism (Picard 1993:85-88).

In relation to the different stereotypes of Muslims and Arabs in Hollywood revealed by media research, the Araz family carries on several such stereotypes through the acts they commit. Visually, however, they are different. There are few visual cues that correspond to the traditional stereotypes, but within, in character they remain true to type. In the past, plots usually took place in Hollywood's 'Middle East'; now they take place on US soil. This analysis indicates that the Muslim stereotype in US television entertainment post-9/11 has undergone a change related to the stereotype's relocalization. The Muslim stereotype today seems clothed in the appearance of the average American, which redefines the Muslim 'Other'. The strangers are now hiding amongst us and may even be living next door.

The new Muslim stereotype offers a bifurcated image of Muslims for day-to-day understanding. If steadily repeated by mass mediation, the stereotype is disturbing news for Muslim minority groups in Western societies. Through its contribution in fabricating prejudice and reinforcing religious conflicts, the stereotype can have a deleterious effect on the development in multicultural societies. Hollywood's delineation of Muslim characters is both a product of, and a producer of, the West's dominant discourses on Muslims. Hence, an important question is how Hollywood's entertainment industry endeavours to anticipate,

adjust and position itself to changes in the political climate and in dominant perceptions of Muslims.⁵³

⁵³ Further research is needed to conceptualise the development and extent of the new Muslim stereotype's proliferation in Hollywood's television drama.

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Article 2: Different interpretive communities

Negotiating Boundaries between Us and Them: Ethnic Norwegians and Norwegian Muslims Speak out about the ‘Next Door Neighbour Terrorist’ in *24*

Introduction

Muslims have often been portrayed as negative stereotypes in Hollywood’s TV entertainment (Shaheen 2000; Woll & Miller 1987). The traditional Muslim stereotype is usually located in a Hollywood ‘Middle East’, and its image is easily recognizable through a number of recurring visual elements. This image of Muslim Arabs as depicted on US TV is described by “The Instant TV Arab Kit”, and consists of a belly dancer’s dress, a turban, a veil, sunglasses, flowing dresses and robes, oil wells, limousines and/or camels (Shaheen 1984:4-5). A new, threatening Muslim stereotype was identified in the 2002-2003 US TV season by Jack G. Shaheen (2008): *the Muslim Arab-American Neighbour as Terrorist*. Since then, Shaheen has documented over 50 programmes featuring this stereotype. The action serial *24* has made an important contribution to promoting this new stereotype. Over several seasons, Muslim terrorists have plotted and carried out brutal attacks against the United States, operating through terrorist cells. The ‘ sleeper cells’ consist of Muslims living seemingly ordinary lives in the United States, mixing in with their neighbourhood. The ambiguity of these characters when introduced on screen has contributed to evoking fear and has complicated decoding, as viewers’ struggle with identifying the characters’ backgrounds. The main focus of the present study is on shedding light on the decoding processes of actual viewers in regard to this new Muslim stereotype.

A textual analysis of *24*’s representation of a Muslim family uncovered that the Muslim American ‘next door neighbour’ terrorist seems to resemble the appearance of the average American; on the outside, it differs from the traditional stereotype, but within, as

regards its character, it remains true to type (Halse 2009). The following article presents a reception study of *24*'s storyline about a Muslim family, examining how various interpretive communities of young adults in Norway perceive the stereotype presented in *24*'s text. It investigates the kinds of understandings and attitudes informants express after having watched *24*, and studies how *24*'s text can mobilize stereotypes and facilitate stereotyping among viewers. This is achieved by identifying and 'tapping' the range and variety of attitudes and understandings through focus group interviews. Do the various interpretive communities read the text differently? And if so, how do their readings differ?

Critical reaction to 24

24 has become a huge success among television audiences worldwide,⁵⁴ including Norway, where it has been aired in prime time on the commercial public service channel, *TV2*. *24* has been a great commercial success for the channel, and when seasons 1 and 2 were aired in 2002-2003, the serial had 571000 viewers per episode, or almost half of the audience in Norway who were watching TV at that time of the day (*VG* 2003).

24 has aroused negative comments among media critics and scholars, especially allegations of the programme supporting US neo-conservative right wing arguments for American soldiers' use of torture during interrogation of both terrorists and suspected terrorists (Mayer 2007; Poniewozik 2007; Prince 2009). Of all of *24*'s seasons, Season 4 has generated the largest amount of negative coverage in the United States. This season faced harsh criticism from various sources, and for the first time, *24* was widely accused by Muslims interest groups of stereotyping Muslims (e.g., CAIR Chicago 2005). *Fox Network TV* promoted the season with the slogan 'They could be next door', together with an image of an American Muslim family. This family featured as a terror cell living in Los Angeles, and

⁵⁴ For instance, on the premiere night, season 6 of *24* had 15.7 million viewers in the United States alone (Mahan 2007).

the storyline upset Muslims throughout the United States. (Dilullo 2007:17).⁵⁵ *Fox Television* took action in the United States to counter the criticism and aired several public announcements in which viewers were urged not to stereotype Muslims (*BBC News* 2007).⁵⁶ Responding to criticism of the fourth season, co-creator Joel Surnow explained: “For it to have any believability and resonance, we had to deal with the world we’re living with, with the terrorists and jihadists” (Ackerman 2005). In Norway, however, the debate about *24*’s representation of Muslims has been ignored by the press despite the show’s huge popularity.

Stereotyping: an approach to researching TV audiences

Stereotypes are often used to characterize and group certain kinds of people. They serve a categorizing function – a fact first recognized by Walter Lippmann (1922), who coined this as *stereotyping*. Stereotyping describes a psychological mechanism that creates categories and enables people to better manage the swirl of data. This is a necessary and efficient process, because “the attempt to see all things freshly and in detail, rather than as types and generalities, is exhausting, and among busy affairs practically out of the question (Lippmann 1922/1991:88). According to Lippmann, the existence and utilization of stereotypes can also be explained and understood in terms of domineering forces’ need to create and sustain structures of difference and power. Both dimensions of the concept are drawn upon in the reception study reported here. The stereotype is applied as an analytical tool that can shed light on how different interpretative communities perceive *24*’s text.

⁵⁵ Christian Blauvelt (2008) claims that the plot in *24* about the Muslim family works like Nazi propaganda fiction films did, like *Jud Suss* (1940) and *Der Ewige Jude* (1940), which instilled in people the fear that their Jewish neighbours might be working to establish a foothold in Germany for the Soviet Union.

⁵⁶ Executive producer and scriptwriter of *24*, Howard Gordon, mentioned that he became aware of the dilemma that ‘fear sells’ during the promotion of Season 4. *Fox*’s marketing department was promoting the season with the slogan ‘They could be next door’, suggesting that this Muslim family could be anyone’s neighbour. *The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)* was concerned that the promotion and the show might incite violence and racial hatred. Gordon stated in a panel debate concerning this issue: “we were acting as handmaids to fear” (Gumbel 2008).

Stereotypes have strength in that they seem to be rigid and resistant to change. At the same time, they appear to be fluid, flexible and accommodating with the social context, as the new Muslim stereotype exemplifies. Drawing on Lippmann's second explanation of the term, media research has tended to operate with the classical view of stereotypes as rigid, simplistic, overgeneralized, and erroneous (Pickering 1995:691). This is a misleading view, which T.E. Perkins (1979) is at odds with. She argues that stereotypes are both simple and complex, as they implicate knowledge about a complex social structure.⁵⁷

In social psychology, a stereotype is usually understood as a cognitive schema, and is thus conceptualized along the lines of Lippmann's first explanation.⁵⁸ When social psychologists turn to examine communication phenomena, it is often to address what they see as social problems. Thus, communication processes as causes or reflections of prejudice and stereotypes have received considerable attention. Sonia Livingstone (1998:6) argues that TV serial drama provides more complex and naturalistic texts for social perception, attribution and stereotyping research than do the artificial scenarios often used by social psychologists. TV serial texts are regarded as rich stimuli grounded in a textured social environment. The chief advantage of a qualitative approach is its ecological validity and finding a sample that reflects the population. TV serials can provide information about minority groups with which the majority has little contact, and they offer images and frameworks for day-to-day understanding, through which people subsequently interpret other social texts.

Stereotyping is an instantiation of the categorization process. It is impossible to have an impression of a group unless the difference between that group and some other group is recognized. Social identity derives from group membership (Mead 1934), and in social

⁵⁷ An example of a stereotype that is not simple is the dumb blonde. Understanding this stereotype demands that one sees more than just hair colour and lack of intelligence. It refers to her sex, which refers to her status in society, her relationship to men, her inability to behave and think rationally, etc. (Perkins 1979:139)

⁵⁸ In social psychology a stereotype is commonly understood as a mental schema that economizes information processing. A definition is: "a specific type of schema, which is a network of beliefs that specify characteristics describing a certain concept. A stereotype is a schema about members of a social group, whether that grouping is based on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationality, regionality, or the like" (Ruscher 2001:4).

psychology, one theory of social identity (Tajfel, Turner 1986) indicates that social-identity processes may have implications for intergroup behaviour. This can happen if we assume that, by and large, people prefer to have a positive self-concept rather than a negative one. Social identity theory argues that, through the cognitive processes of categorization and grouping, the ingroup members will develop a stereotypical view of the outgroup members, and through the motivational process of seeking to maintain a relatively high social identity, the stereotype of the outgroup members will tend to be negative (Hinton 2000:114-115).

Towards a multidimensional model of TV reception

A basic premise for a reception analysis is that members of the audience are active readers of media messages. Therefore, the question is not only how the content influences the receiver, but also what meanings the receiver brings to the content. In his seminal work, *the Nationwide Audience*, David Morley (1980) investigates how viewers with different backgrounds interpreted the British current affairs programme *Nationwide*, using Stuart Hall's 'encoding/decoding' approach in the analysis of reception interviews.⁵⁹ This research design resembles Morley's in that it gathers empirical data from actual viewers with different backgrounds, but applies instead Kim Schröder's (2000, 2003) 'multidimensional model of mass media reception'. Empirical audience research has revealed that actual readings are often more complex than Hall's model is able to reveal (see Condit 1989; Barker 1998). Applying Hall's model in reception studies has resulted in research that has been too narrowly occupied with ideology and class struggle, tending to neglect other important categories, like ethnicity and culture – categories that are relevant to the present study. The multidimensional model deals more profoundly with the complexity of actualized readings to audiences. It

⁵⁹ Prior to Morley's audience study, he and Charlotte Brunson (1978) had already undertaken an encompassing textual analysis of the *Nationwide* programme.

ensures that each dimension of media reception receives analytical attention in its own right (Schröder 2000:254), which is important for providing an answer to the study's hypothesis.

The multidimensional model proposes to separate readers' subjectively experienced agreement or disagreement with the text from the researcher's evaluation of the role played by audiences' positions in hegemonic struggles. It is used as an analytical tool and checklist to sharpen the focus on the fundamental aspects of mediated production of meaning, and it is limited to the reception process. The model offers a theoretical framework of what is essential to investigate when it comes to media reception and includes five general and fundamental dimensions of reception. The *motivation* aspect highlights the relevance relation that exists between texts and their readers; *comprehension* deals with how audience members comprehend media content, denotatively and connotatively; *discrimination* is concerned with whether audience readings are characterized by an awareness of the text's 'constructedness'; *position* is about the 'subjective' attitude towards the text accompanying a reading and *action* deals with how recipients use media content in their everyday life (Schröder 2000, 2003).⁶⁰ The model makes it possible to draw attention to the heterogeneous aspects of audience discourses about media experiences and affords an opportunity to incorporate themes that follow the concrete object of an investigation.

Methodological design

The focus group interview is a method in which several people discuss an issue with a researcher who serves as a leader/moderator. It can be used to observe how an audience creates meaning from media through conversation and interaction with each other. Its strength is that it offers "ways of eliciting, stimulating, and elaborating audience interpretations"

⁶⁰ In this study, the *evaluation* dimension of the model is left out, as Schröder does in a revised version (Schröder 2003). Moreover, and in accordance with the model's heuristic intention, the *discrimination* dimension is left out. Interestingly enough, the informants showed few signs of an awareness of the 'constructedness' of the text in their readings of 24.

(Hansen et al. 1998:258). The research design has a comparative approach, as it intends to map out the reception of a TV drama among various groups of young adults in Norway. The focus group interview is known for its ability to ‘tap’ into human tendencies (Krueger et al. 1994:10). Thus it suits the purpose of the present study, because attitudes, perceptions and meanings are seldom formed in a social vacuum; they are formed through interaction with other people.⁶¹ One problem with focus group interviews is when someone in the group dominates the conversation, which entails the risk of distorting the audience data, especially when this person has extreme or unrepresentative views.

Seven focus group interviews were carried out, and the groups consisted of young adults recruited from a secondary school (five groups) and an immigrant education centre (two groups) in Norway. Each focus group consisted of three to seven informants. Both genders participated in each interview, except in one case where the group consisted of three males. Selected scenes from the serial in which the Muslim family was depicted were screened for the group. The scenes encompassed the overall storyline concerning a Muslim family in *24*.⁶² Afterwards, the participants took part in semi-structured interviews, where the questions were related to central themes and concepts, such as the informants’ perception of the characters depicted. Before screening, the interviewees were informed that the purpose of the study is to try to understand how various educational milieus interpret a contemporary US TV drama. It was stressed that nothing the informants’ might say during discussions would be

⁶¹ Having to choose between individual interviews or focus group interviews can be difficult. The individual interview enables the researcher to yield rich material, because she can go in depth and elicit spontaneity and reflection in the interview situation (Gentikow 2005:84). This study has a comparative approach where the aim is to investigate informants’ readings based on their ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The focus group interview is preferable, as it sheds light on media reception in the context of interpretative communities.

⁶² In *24*, four or five stories are usually told simultaneously in one episode, and there are often sharp transitions between the plots. The plot involving the family did not intersect with the other storylines in Season 4, so it could readily be extracted from the episodes it featured in. One limitation of this approach is that the larger context around these scenes was left out owing to practical concerns about carrying out focus group interviews.

wrong, as long as they together discussed the moderator's questions in a thorough and honest way.⁶³

Informants from secondary school were recruited from classes belonging to two educational programmes: Media and Communication – 'MC' (three classes) and Engineering and Industrial Production – 'EIP' (two classes). Altogether 28 informants, age 16 to 18, participated from this school. There were six boys and six girls in the EIP focus groups, and six boys and ten girls in the MC focus groups.⁶⁴ The Norwegian Muslim immigrants had been screened in advance by language teachers at the Immigrant Education Centre – 'IC'. All had lived in Norway for several years and had sufficient mastery of the language in use to participate in a research interview. These participants were practicing Muslims; all of them also came from conflict zones with predominantly Muslim populations (Palestine, Iraq, the Russian Republic of Chechnya and Somalia).⁶⁵

All the focus groups were formed on the basis of pre-existing social groups. They were part of educational milieus in which they knew each other. This allowed for a permissive and familiar atmosphere. It was not a criterion to be a regular viewer of *24*. The goal was to study regular audiences' reception of a TV drama in Norway which was mass-mediated at the time. However, students who had prior experience of *24* were prioritized. Discussions, which lasted about 30-60 minutes, were recorded and transcribed. 'Nicknames' were used to ensure the participants' anonymity. The age of the informants who participated was between 16 and 29 years, which covers a good part of *24*'s target audience: 18-34 years (Seidman 2009). This was the main motive for selecting 'young adult' informants.⁶⁶

⁶³ The moderator had previously worked as a teacher at secondary school. The knowledge obtained there was an asset for making the informants feel comfortable and helping them to speak out.

⁶⁴ Selecting students from different educational programmes helped avoid recruiting a homogeneous group of informants as regards social background. Students in MC aim first and foremost at qualifying for higher level studies, while students at EIP do not.

⁶⁵ In total there were 10 first-generation Norwegian immigrant informants (three women and seven men), and their age varied from 20 to 29 years.

⁶⁶ In Norway today the youth period in life is considered to last longer than just some decades ago. For many in their youth a new phase has emerged that comprises both the teenage years and a later phase of education, from

The Muslim-American neighbour as terrorist plotline in Season 4

Muslims feature as radical Islamic terrorists in five out of the total of eight seasons of 24. Here, they typically pose the initial threat by carrying out the first, spectacular and ‘shocking’ attack, but are later in the season replaced by more ‘resourceful’ terrorists with other backgrounds.⁶⁷ Habib Marwan is the enemy mastermind in Season 4. He organizes a large network of terrorists, who are mainly recruited from the Middle East, but living in the United States as so-called sleeper cells.

The Araz family – husband (Navi), wife (Dina) and their seventeen-year-old son Behrooz – is one of the sleeper cells, and plays a key role in Marwan’s master plan to cause numerous nuclear power stations in the United States to melt down. They facilitate the acts of other terrorists mainly by delivering weapon parts and information to them. The family is introduced when they are having breakfast in their middleclass home, as a newscast reports on a terrorist attack they were involved in. As well as discussing the attack with his family, Navi reveals that he is aware of his son’s ongoing relationship with a white American girl, Debbie, despite his disapproval of it.

During the storyline Dina kills Debbie, Navi tries to have his son killed by a fellow terrorist whom Behrooz himself kills. Navi also murders his brother-in-law and finally Behrooz commits patricide. All of this happens as the family members in turn betray each other, and eventually Navi ends up dead and the others are captured by the hero in the series, Jack Bauer.

eighteen until individuals are in their mid- to late twenties. This is understood as the ‘young adult’ period and is to a large degree constituted by the educational society (Frønes and Brusdal 2000:50).

⁶⁷ While seasons 2, 5, 6 and 8 focus on a more powerful non-Islamic force as the main enemy to the United States, which manipulates and uses Islamic extremists as ‘puppets on a string’ for its own political and financial ends, Muslim terrorists are the main enemy in Season 4.

The viewers' relation to 24 and popular culture

The *motivational* dimension concerns the relevance relation that exists between the readers' personal universe and the universe apprehended to be presented by the text (Schröder 2000:45). The majority of informants were not regular viewers of *24*, and were probably not as motivated to watch it as fans would be. Of the ethnic Norwegian informants, 17 out of 28 had watched the show before; 9 of those were boys and 8 were girls.⁶⁸ Most of the boys who had watched *24* reported that they had watched at least half a season, while the majority of the females had seen some episodes at random. Of the Norwegian Muslims, five had watched it, three had not and two did not answer. Most of those who had seen it before had watched only a few episodes randomly.⁶⁹

The ethnic Norwegians expressed that their main reason for liking the show was the high level of excitement it offered. The Norwegian Muslim participants' discussion, however, revealed less excitement concerning its entertainment value. Some of these participants expressed ambiguity in their motivation for watching, which gave an impression of ambivalence towards what they got out of engaging with *24*'s text:

Moderator: What do you think about *24*?

Diana (Female, IC): I think it's completely sick. This doesn't happen to ordinary people. This is nonsense.

Moderator: Do you like it then, the nonsense?

Diana: Yeah, we all watch. We all like movies.

Comprehension refers to how audience members make sense of the media content. It is examined to determine to what degree an interpretation is consistent with or aberrant from

⁶⁸ After each interview session, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire with questions about, among other things, their age, what they like/dislike about *24* and their favourite TV serials.

⁶⁹ The story about the Muslim family can be related to the everyday life of first generation Muslim immigrants in Western countries. This probably increased the Muslim participants' motivation for watching the text.

the majority of the participants' or the encoders' preferred meaning. Most of the informants seemed to be in agreement as to the text's basic storyline. On occasion participants would misread it denotatively, but when that happened, other participants would be quick to correct them. It seldom happened that the entire group was off track. The EIP community delivered more aberrant readings on a denotative level than did the MCs. A few times, the entire group gave erroneous interpretations. This happened when misreadings went unchallenged.

Moderator: What do you find interesting about the Araz family?

Hårek (Male, EIP): How that little boy tried to manage to survive and that he had the courage to stand up to his dad. He was pissed off.

Rusland (Female, EIP): The son wasn't like them. His mother was in with it [the terrorist activities] at first, when she forced her son to shoot her [Debbie].

Pita (Female, EIP): The mother gets her son to shoot people, different kinds of people.

'Rusland' claims that the son was forced to shoot his girlfriend, and 'Pita' supports this by adding that he was forced by his mother to kill others as well. None of this actually happened. In a MC group, an identical claim was made about the son killing his girlfriend, but this interpretation was immediately challenged by others. Here we see the kind of "relative unity amidst diversity" that an interpretive community ensures (Fish 1980). In a reception analysis, this manifests itself as socially patterned readings. The fact that the EIP community undertook more aberrant readings of the text than the MC community did may have to do with the fact that the MCs received training in decoding media texts as part of their educational programme.

For the most part, the Norwegian Muslims' discussions did not go into details concerning the actual content of the text, as the readings were primarily on a meta-level. Some seemed unfamiliar with this kind of intense and information-dense TV entertainment.

The Norwegian Muslims were older than the MC and EIPs, which may give them an advantage concerning comprehension. Still, it is unlikely that they have had the same amount of exposure to US popular culture, and this was reflected in their readings, especially in their lack of references to other TV series and films. In the questionnaire, Muslim informants reported that their favourite TV series were shows like *O Clone*, a Brazilian soap opera, and *Alzer Salem*. Still, over half of the TV series reported were from the United States – like *Desperate Housewives* and *That 70's Show*, indicating some familiarity with US TV series.

Depiction and perception of religion

When the moderator asked questions about the Muslim family's motivations, general agreement as to 'what Muslims are like' in connection with religion would often come up as logical answers for the ethnic Norwegians.⁷⁰ In their readings, the majority seemed to share negative beliefs about Muslims and Islam.

Moderator: Why do you think the family is behaving in the way they do?

3Mix (Male, EIP): It has something to do with their faith that makes them fight for the cause.

Birki (Male, EIP): The Qur'an makes people believe in this [the cause], so that they think that it's okay to kill people

Sheep (Female, MC): Actually I know people who have told me how it is in their family, and it was like you were supposed to obey the father, and if you made some mistakes you could get killed.

The violent Muslim is the most widely distributed stereotype of Muslims in Western popular culture (Karim 2003:62). Thus, it was perhaps unsurprising that several ethnic Norwegians made generalizations about Muslims' innate tendency to kill when explaining the family's motivation. For 'Sheep', however, a personal encounter she had with Muslims came

⁷⁰ During (and before) a focus group interview value-laden terms like Muslim, terrorist, and Islam were not used by the moderator. It was assumed that this could influence the informants' readings.

to mind and confirmed the validity of the text she had just viewed. These Muslims told her that it is a somewhat common occurrence in their families to kill their own when the father's orders were not obeyed.

In most of the ethnic Norwegians' discussions, the term Muslim was not mentioned until the last part of the interview. When someone in the group came up with the word 'Muslim' or 'the Qur'an' (Islam was not mentioned), the conversation would veer off in a xenophobic direction, and hostile remarks and negative attributions regarding the family and the culture they represent were more frequent.⁷¹ If mentioned, the terms functioned as labels of primary potency, triggering xenophobia and negative stereotypes among the informants. Labels of primary potency are exceedingly salient and powerful, and tend to prevent alternative classification (Allport 1954:179). Cultural/religious and racial labels, like 'Muslims' and Arabs', are often of this type, because they can resemble labels that indicate some outstanding incapacity – like 'Sheep's' belief that Muslim families are dictated by irrational, brutal and despotic fathers.⁷²

An important contribution to the fear that the new Muslim stereotype evoked in the ethnic Norwegians was related to the challenge and tension it created in the negotiation process of categorization. The informants seemed uncertain about whether the stereotype was a foreigner or a Muslim, because in terms of appearance it did not resemble the traditional Muslim stereotype.

Kork (Male, MC) [Behrooz] is one who had experienced a tough childhood down there [Middle East] in the place that we talked about (the others laugh). It comes with the culture.

Ims (Female, MC) It could be religion (other informants: yes, religion)

⁷¹ In the questionnaire the ethnic Norwegian viewers answered whether they knew a Muslim personally. In the MC community, 8 informants did and 8 did not, and in the EIP community, 7 informants did and 3 informants did not.

⁷² Gordon W. Allport (1954:179) writes that "labels of primary potency act like shrieking sirens, deafening us to all finer discriminations we might otherwise perceive," because they distract our attention from the concrete reality.

Dal (Female, MC): I think it has a lot to do with (interrupted)

Kork: Their upbringing

Dal: It's what kind of view they have on life

Im: Yeah, it's like 'I will kill my child'

Pant (Female, MC): That is a rather extreme example, though.

The term Muslim had been mentioned for the first time before this extract. Now informants joined in to share their prejudiced beliefs and perceptions of the outgroup 'Muslims', generalizing from a single instance to the group level. The conversation changed to where biased and crude attributions regarding an alien culture seemed to be an accepted way of making sense of the family's actions. They were considered as insane, primitive killers, and the explanation was found in their religion. This extract illustrates how the direction of the conversation among a majority of the ethnic Norwegian focus groups changed because of a label of primary potency, which enabled socially patterned readings and modified the perception of the new Muslim stereotype.⁷³ But in this example, 'Pant' entered the conversation and negotiated the group assessment. In the MC community, a group member would randomly enter the negotiation process and challenge inferences made about Muslims.

A majority of the Norwegian Muslims expressed resentment and anger over 24's representation of the Muslim family. Several of them said that they feared that it might have repercussions for Muslims both in Norway and in the United States, and most considered it a malicious portrayal of Muslims.

Skipper (Male, IC): As a Muslim I can't accept it, this kind of narration. It's unacceptable, because as a Muslim I have my opinions on all other fields, and if I claim and every Muslim in this world claims

⁷³ The finding supports David Morley's (1980) argument that social groups provide resources and narratives within which individuals understand the media.

they are Muslims, they must have strong opinions on everything, like other human beings. You have to take responsibility for this position.

‘Skipper’ stressed that everyone had to stand up for who they are, including Muslims. Being a Muslim involves having responsibilities to the Muslim people, their tradition and to the obligations of Islam. His statement “like other human beings” indicated an attempt to assimilate Muslims into the larger group of “humans”. This can be considered an effort to reduce the diverging mechanisms that stereotyping facilitates. Moreover, ‘Skipper’ asserted that finding enjoyment in *24*’s storyline cannot be combined with being a practicing Muslim. Several IC informants did not find the portrayal of Islam reliable, because they could not see any evidence that the family was motivated by *jihad*. And as one female informant pointed out: “Muslims need a reason to do this”.

Negotiating boundaries between ingroups and outgroups

Group identification is central to media audiences’ selection and cognitive processing of messages, and gratifications based on group identification account for significant unique variance in TV viewing (Harwood & Abhik 2005:194-195). When viewers’ read information about TV serial characters the cognitive process of categorization emphasizes the differences between the groups they are associated with. Thus, one can view outgroup members as more different than they actually are.

Nansi (Female, EIP): The family is totally psycho, completely whacked in their heads.

Hårek (Male, EIP): They are just ordinary Muslims

In this case, ‘Nansi’ described negative character traits that she ascribed to the specific family portrayed. The stereotyping started with ‘Hårek’’s comment when he labelled the

characters as Muslims and ascribed the negative traits to Muslims in general – as typical qualities. In this way, the focus group accentuated the difference between the ingroup and the outgroup by derogating the other group, where the differences within the group ‘Muslims’ were underestimated: *they are all the same*. This stereotypical reading can be seen as motivated by the group’s wish to attain gratifications from intergroup comparisons, such that the group they belong to is assessed more positively.

One source of stereotyping stems from the differentiation of ‘us’ and ‘them’. Linguistically, the division is particularly evident in the use of pronouns associated with these groups. The first person plurals (we, us) reflect a sense of ingroup cohesion, belongingness and positive evaluation, while the third person plural (they, them) tends to become associated with the opposite (Ruscher 2001:36). *24*’s storyline about the Muslim family seemed to enable viewers to make this separation without effort.

Børdy (Male, EIP): They come to a new country and think that they can do things like they do back home.

Grizzly (Male, EIP): Ruining it for everybody, that’s what they are all about.

Børdy: Just because they feel bad about themselves.

In the interviews the family (and Muslims or ‘the foreigners’) was mostly referred to using the third person plural ‘they’ by the ethnic Norwegians. A negative evaluation would often follow, as the above excerpt shows. This linguistic pattern presented the family as a certain type of human being with major faults – as people who are unable to adapt to the culture of the ingroup because ‘they’ aren’t like ‘us’. An interesting finding concerning this pattern is that ‘us’ included Americans in general in *24*, who were depicted as heroes and more ordinary US citizens. ‘They’ belonged to the outgroup, indicating that ‘they’ did not belong in the Western world even while living in it. The Orientalist stereotype of Muslims’

subterfuge and deceit was drawn upon when evaluating ‘them’ and their participation in ‘our’ country/part of the world (Pickering 2001:167).

Pant (Female, MC): A forced marriage?

Dal (Female, MC): Yeah (laughs), that’s it. With him [the father], they have a nice house and a good life, sort of. Love and stuff.

Ims (Female, MC): That probably exists in those kinds of countries as well.

Dal: No, it doesn’t!

Obama (Male, MC): It’s like having to choose between a banana and an orange, when all you really want is an apple (group-laughter).

In the extract above, the Muslims’ family life and a forced marriage were evaluated, and the understandings that were reached evoked laughter and amusement. ‘Dal’ used irony to ridicule the parents’ relationship. ‘Ims’ acknowledged that they probably had love in these countries as well, but ‘Dal’ then rejects this in a serious tone. The stereotypical beliefs held about Muslims in general were reflected in the ironic and derogatory language used, and the intended meaning was the opposite. The example above was one of numerous cases where ethnic Norwegians utilized ingroup jokes, irony and humour, which evoked laughter when commenting on and interpreting what they believed to be the family’s background, culture, and way of life. But in a few cases someone became uncertain as to how they would be perceived by the moderator when they made stereotypical attributions:

Dovendyret (Male, MC): Many foreigners think that America is guilty of all things sleazy, and they will therefore do everything in their power to ruin things for them. But we might get reported to the police if we come up with even the slightest racist remarks.

Moderator: U-huh

Trollet (Female, MC): Was that a yes?

‘Dovendyret’ addressed the topic of retaliation: autochthonous people dare not complain openly for fear of revenge by the overall norm of tolerance or by victims of such talk (see van Dijk 1987:146-148). Then, ‘Trollet’ tried to ground the conversation, probably seeking confirmation of a shared view on foreigners on the part of the moderator in order to solicit shared understandings. Such a view could not be solicited, because the moderator’s task is to stay as neutral as possible in a focus group interview.

Most of the IC community seemed on occasion to share in their readings prejudiced beliefs about and bias towards the people they held responsible for the text: ‘the Americans’.

Mady (Female, IC): I think that when the Americans started to make such movies, they are teaching people to become like this. Everyone watches, and then at the same time they started with terrorism as well, in different countries.

AF (Male, IC): They teach children how to work.

Mady: Yes, they teach children, because children also play the same game when they watch this type of film. They’re the ones who learn to become crazy.

Stereotypical statements like “everyone watches” and then “become crazy” reflected homogeneous perceptions of Americans. The outgroup bias the IC community exhibited had similarities with the ethnic Norwegians’ stereotyping of Muslims, including an identical linguistic pattern following the use of ‘they’. The perceptions are related to James G. Carrier’s (1995) notion of *Occidentalism*. One type of Occidentalism occurs “In studies of the ways that people outside the West imagine themselves, for their self-image often develops in contrast to their stylized image of the West” – they define the West in an essential manner” (Carrier 1995:6). However, the IC community used the term *Americans*, a more specific label, indicating that the informants did not include other Western countries in the outgroup. During the conversations the term Americans was often applied as if it represented some type of

unified entity with a shared view and values. The community defined Americans in contrast to how they would define themselves – a reading strategy that seeks gratification through group identification by contrasting ‘our’ values with the negative values of the outgroup. In the extract, the outgroup was depicted as consisting of amoral, insensitive, manipulated cultural dupes. Among the Muslim immigrants, there were also a few who disagreed with the majority’s readings. For instance, one informant claimed that in reality a Muslim family can have the sort of problems that the serial addressed. He considered the representation of the family to have a kernel of truth, claiming that a family from Afghanistan he knew about had to face identical problems.

Position and action

The notion *position* covers the informants’ subjective experience of agreeing or disagreeing with the perspective perceived to exist in the text. In the analysis of the transcripts three types of readings were found. The categories were defined according to informants’ attitudes towards 24’s text, and were labelled as *sympathetic*, *sceptical* and *dissident*.⁷⁴ Examples of all three types of readings were found in the interview data. The analysis shows that the EIP community’s readings were sympathetic to 24’s story. For the most part, the informants talked about the text as something they could easily assess and grasp the intended meaning of. Sympathetic readings were seen in utterances where informants aimed to discover, in as loyal a manner as possible, what might be assumed to be the original intention of the producer of the text (Gripsrud 2002:142), or where the text was viewed as more or less representing ‘reality’.

Moderator: What did you find interesting about the Araz-family?

⁷⁴ These categories are inductively generated from the data. They correspond to some degree with the reading strategies proposed in Hall’s model: dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings (Hall 1973).

Birki (Male, EIP): The way they persuaded that little boy to kill her [Debbie], and the crazy stuff they made him do. They got him to cover it up by making him show his mobile phone, for example. There were things there preceding it; if he didn't obey he would die.

'Birki's' interpretation was typical for the EIP community; most readings suggested that viewers sided with and identified with the boy, considering him a 'normal' teenager innocently caught up in a hostile family and culture. As one informant put it: "he didn't do anything wrong". There was no indication in the viewers' utterances of a sceptical attitude towards the content. The readings correlated with how the producers of *24* claimed they portrayed the family. Executive producer and director of *24*, Jon Cassar boasted that they are good at fleshing out bad guys and basing them in reality, and that they were especially successful with the Muslim family (Dilullo 2007:90).

Most informants in the MC community had a sympathetic view on *24*'s portrayal and displayed a positive and affectionate attitude towards the text. Like the EIP community, they identified with Behrooz and the problems he had to face. In the readings of the parents, they expressed negative views on their behaviours and culture, but seldom on *24*'s representation of them. Some readings fell in the category *sceptical*, but these were exceptions. Sceptical readings were found in those utterances that expressed doubt about *24*'s depiction of social, political or cultural aspects.

The majority of the Norwegian Muslim community could readily be described as *dissident* readers. In the dissident readings, the intended meaning of the text was seemingly comprehended, but vigorously opposed and rejected. The way characters were portrayed evoked anger and resentment. Some informants refused to explain what they disliked, and a male informant simply dismissed it as "a stupid story". For him it was a waste of energy to elaborate on what he had seen. A salient feature in the readings was how this would be perceived by people in Western countries, especially Americans. A female informant was for

instance worried that Americans would consider this family to be typical of Muslim families in general. Most of the informants rejected the text's position and content, and couldn't identify with the characters or accept the storyline. Still, a minority expressed a more positive attitude towards the text.

The *action* dimension is narrowly understood as readings in which viewers make claims or hints about subsequent social practice. In the interview data, this occurred only in relation to dissident readings. A few Norwegian Muslims expressed readings that pointed to social practices influenced by encounters with media texts such as *24*'s. One informant claimed that the limited diversity that Norwegian TV channels offered Muslims led them to watch satellite TV instead, asking rhetorically: "what else can we do if stuff like this is aired every evening?" His comment can be interpreted as a confirmation of the so-called '*media ghetto*' thesis: the notion that most immigrants turn to ethnic media exclusively in order to preserve and conform their ethnic identities (cf. Bailey and Harindranath 2006). Several Muslim informants stated that entertainment like *24*'s text promoted discrimination against Muslims. One viewer related this to a personal experience.

Fatima (Female, IC 20): There are probably many who watch this movie who are afraid to have contact with us. Now, I am here at school and I have many friends, but they ask me such difficult questions, so I answer them what I think is right. But I have noticed that they don't make contact with other Muslims, because they think that they are so bad.

An understanding of this statement is that 'Fatima' assumes a connection between non-Muslims' reading of texts like *24*'s and a subsequent social practice, such as avoiding contact with Muslims. An assumed key factor in the explanation of why most Muslim informants were positioned as dissident readers was that they made this connection when interpreting the text.

Concluding remarks

Findings identified different patterns of reception. On the one hand the ethnic Norwegian participants found gratifications in *24*'s storyline; on the other, a majority of the Norwegian Muslims found it unpleasant and offensive. There was a notable distinction in the readings concerning how different people were divided into groups, depending on the interpretive community's ethnic and cultural background. Most frequently the ethnic Norwegians would label Muslim characters in the storyline and the people they associated them with as 'the foreigners' – as an unspecified, homogeneous outgroup – while most of the Muslim informants seemed to regard 'Americans', whom they held responsible for the text, as a more specific outgroup.

An important contribution to the fear that the new Muslim stereotype evoked in the ethnic Norwegians was related to the challenge and tension it created in the negotiation process of categorization. The informants seemed uncertain as to the ethnicity and status to the characters, probably because their appearance did not resemble traditional Muslim stereotypes. The IC community, however, readily identified these characters as Middle Eastern Muslims. The findings show how the ethnic Norwegian community modified their understandings of *24*'s text and the perception of the Muslim stereotype through socially patterned readings. Moreover, they confirmed the growing importance of ethnic and cultural identities in the viewing of US TV serials in Norway, and demonstrated the variety of interpretations found among the Norwegian young adults. They also showed that texts like *24*'s can function as stimuli for interpretive communities in the negotiation of boundaries between us and them.

It is plausible to argue that the new Muslim stereotype, in addition to eliciting insecurity and xenophobia amongst non-Muslims, is also troubling for the Muslim immigrant community. The bifurcated stereotype narrows their opportunity to counter the values and

morals embedded in it by adapting to the societies they migrate to; because no matter how successful they are at assimilating to the Western lifestyle and appearance – on the inside they are deemed according to the old stereotype and are presumed to be secretly waiting for the right moment to destroy Western values and the Western way of life.

Serial dramas like *24* participate in forming an arena, in which representations, social identities and borders between ingroup and outgroup members are constructed and negotiated. The most important function of the stereotype is to maintain sharp boundary definitions, to define clearly where the pale ends and thus who is clearly within and who is clearly beyond it, to make visible the invisible (Dyer 2002:16). The most troublesome aspect of the new Muslim stereotype's impact on Western TV audiences is how it enables one to make sharp boundary definitions. The vast and heterogeneous category 'Muslim' is, needless to say, insufficient for labelling potential Islamic terrorists. This study, however, documents that in the decoding process, a majority of the ethnic Norwegians would label Muslims in general as the outgroup as plausible terrorists. The new Muslim stereotype seems to facilitate a perceptual slide between cultural and ethnic categories and offer non-Muslims a bifurcated image of Muslims in day-to-day understanding. This may, in effect, have consequences for social perception in general. If steadily repeated by mass mediation, this stereotype is disquieting news for Muslim minority groups in Western societies.

Defining world events in the past three decades – like Israel's invasion of Lebanon (1982), Operation Desert Storm (1991), and the military invasions into Afghanistan and Iraq (2001 and 2003) – has made an impact on Hollywood's representation of Muslims and Arabs. Hollywood's dispatching and replacement of desert nomads and oily sheiks by the violent and crazed Islamic fundamentalist is a result of these developments (Shaheen 2008:XVI). Acts of terror against Western countries in the past decade and the following rolling news coverage – like the 9/11 attacks on the United States (2001) and the Madrid and London bombings in

Europe (2004 and 2005) – have paved the way for an alternative Muslim stereotype to encapsulate the new threat. These media events have made the Western public aware of the danger posed by Muslim ‘sleeper cells’, and fictitious representations of this image can thus be viewed as having a kernel of truth. The image is now at the threshold of becoming a common feature in Hollywood’s TV entertainment, and further research is needed to elucidate its development and audience reception.

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Article 3: Racial counter-stereotypes

Counter-stereotypical Images of Muslim Characters in the Television Serial 24: A Difference that Makes no Difference?

Counter-stereotypes in Hollywood's television entertainment

Hollywood has an extensive history of producing images of whites as an exclusive ingroup.

Whites' position in Hollywood's narratives is usually one of 'being in charge' or 'taking charge' of unfolding events. Richard Dyer (1997:3) confirms the dominance of whites in Hollywood's narratives, pointing out that research into television and film has repeatedly shown that in Western representation whites are "overwhelmingly and disproportionately predominant, have the central and elaborated roles, and above all are placed as the norm, the ordinary, the standard."

I would assert that a process of reorientation has transpired in Hollywood – a move towards a noticeable increase in representation of racial diversity in television shows (e.g. Diffrient 2011; Nishime 2011; Tierney 2013). Furthermore, the 'Hollywood rule' that the faces of stars featured as main characters in broadcast drama should be white appears to be less well-founded than before, as the number of non-Caucasian actors cast in starring roles of television series has risen in recent decades (Andreeva 2010). The phenomenon could be observed in US prime time television series as early as in the 1970s, as platoon sitcom shows with its major racial characters, for example *Barney Miller* (*Four D Productions/ABC* 1974-1982), became popular, and in the 1980s – particularly in crime dramas such as *Hill Street Blues* (*MTM Enterprises/NBC* 1981-1987) and *Miami Vice* (*Universal TV/NBC* 1984-1990). Two celebrated and very popular comedy shows in which people of colour were the protagonists were *The Cosby Show* (*Carsey Werner Company/NBC* 1984-1992) and *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (*Quincy Jones-David Salzman Entertainment/The Stuffed Dog Company/NBC* 1990-2006). These shows were nevertheless largely racially segregated.

Dennis Haysbert's role as a black American President in the television serial *24* (*Imagine Entertainment/20th-Century Fox television/Fox* 2001-2010), is another example of an orientation towards raising the profile of roles played by non-white actors in US television series, which even caused some media commentators to speculate about the possible positive impact this high-profile casting may have had on the 2008 Presidential campaign of Barack Obama (e.g. O'Kelly 2010).

One important element in the shift in how people of colour are portrayed in US television series is the application of racial *counter-stereotypes* – which is to be understood as a distinct representational mode characterized by an attempt to negate a stereotypical view of a racial group by presenting members exemplifying the opposite of stereotypical traits usually associated with the group. This representational mode has become increasingly common in contemporary popular culture texts. Éric Macé (2009:10) defines it as 'a portrayal that takes on the opposite position to the stereotype by proposing a 'reverse' performance.' Racial counter-stereotypes are, for example, middle class people of colour having social prestige, as principal characters in television programmes. Stereotypical depictions of coloured people, on the other hand, work as distancing strategies that place certain groups so as to point up and perpetuate certain normative boundaries for social conduct, roles and judgements, thus distinguishing what is threatening and disturbing from what is regarded as acceptable and legitimate (Pickering 2001:174).

Racial counter-stereotypes are often members of racial minority groups that disconfirm existing stereotypes.⁷⁵ In contemporary US television series, counter-stereotypes are created by equipping characters who are members of a negatively stereotyped group with traits that run counter to the stereotypical ways in which they are generally represented in

⁷⁵ In addition to stereotypes, Macé (2009:7-13) presents two distinct representational modes of people of colour on television: counter-stereotypes and anti-stereotypes. Anti-stereotypes are, in contrast to counter-stereotypes, more present in a counter-hegemonic dynamic, as they "question and trouble stereotypes as part of a broader reflexivity about postcolonial ethnicities."

mainstream US television – they belong to the middle or upper-middle class, and occupy prestigious jobs in roles as the main characters. Counter-stereotypes can be understood as mediated images of a postracial world. They offer privileged images that tend to deviate from the social position to the group portrayed [cf. *The Cosby Show*, Jhally and Lewis 1992]. I would like to stress that applying counter-stereotypes in popular media texts can be an appealing strategy when representing people of colour, as it displays an attunement to today's multiracial society. Yet, we should bear in mind that the increase of counter-stereotypes in US television shows does not necessarily mean that racial stereotypes are being abolished.

I employ the notion of the racial counter-stereotype as an analytical tool by presenting a study of two Muslim principal characters from the Middle East in the television serial, *24*, that have counter-stereotypical traits. The crux of my analysis centres on how the counter-stereotype operates in *24*'s text and what its key characteristics are. The *Fox* network's critically acclaimed serial functions as an ideal site on which to examine counter-stereotypes, providing an illuminating case study of television producers', writers' and actors' efforts to counterbalance or neutralize stereotyping by the inclusion of positive characters that confound the stereotypes. My aim in this study is to refine and add more layers to the concept by subjecting it to textual analysis. In the analysis I draw particularly on the notion of the 'postracial' – a concept that, as used today, often operates (intentionally or not) as a way to cloak or mask the persistence of racism in the United States by minimizing its importance (Ono 2010:230). The notion of the postracial influences the shaping of Hollywood's counter-stereotypical images. Moreover, it interconnects with the racial counter-stereotype in several ways. In the following I will provide a more detailed account of the postracial.

The postracial in the United States

As representations of people of colour in US television are arguably less uniform today, the question is what the new representations are, and how they fit into the postracial system that is being put forward and negotiated. The increase of racial counter-stereotypes in US television entertainment is part of an overall change in the representation of people of colour. They may serve as a distinct indicator of the blurring of colour lines in US popular culture, as they reflect a larger process in racial politics, where racial paradigms are changing. It is rather commonly held today that the United States is moving towards a 'postracial era'. According to this line of thinking, the racial categories that are central to identity politics in the United States are now more a matter of choice than ascription. The phenomenon of Barack Obama, the country's first black President, may be taken to imply that the United States has entered a postracial era, as his election supports the notion of a growing uncertainty about the significance of colour lines. Racial counter-stereotypes are equivocal, being characterized by 'colour blindness' – in both a positive and a negative sense. In the present article, their more detrimental facets are foregrounded. These are more prominent, I find. The application of counter-stereotypes seems to be connected to how the postracial discourse operates in contemporary US culture politics.

Some scholars are sceptical about what they describe as the myth of the postracial. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010) and Tim Wise (2010), for example, both reject the idea that race has all but vanished as a factor for shaping the life chances of all Americans – the proposition that lies at the very heart of postracial liberalism. Furthermore, they criticize President Obama for propagating the postracial myth and 'colour-blind' politics. According to them, he has reached the level of success he has by making strategic moves towards racelessness by adopting a postracial persona and political stance. Bonilla-Silva (2010:179), an oft-heard voice among the critics, envisages instead of a postracial future in the United

States, an emerging tri-racial system which will be comprised of whites at the top, an intermediary group of 'honorary whites' (including most Middle Eastern Americans), and a non-white collective at the bottom. Hence, Bonilla-Silva deems post-racial policies and politics inadequate for remedying continuing racial inequities.

A key objective to post-racial discourse is to minimize the charge of racism. Along such lines, Kent A. Ono (2010:229) argues that post-racism in the United States attracts unknowing subjects to adopt a pre-racial consciousness, which, in effect, enables them to continue carrying out more or less racist practices – now dressed in new clothes. Moreover, he asserts that the notion of the post-racial functions as a discourse of distraction that fills up television screens with images and narratives of progress, while simultaneously ignoring valid information about racism and its consequences (Ono 2010:229-230).

In the analysis I will critically examine racial counter-stereotypes – a representational mode that arguably is part of the repertoire to post-racial discourse – the main strategy of which is to forget race. The textual analysis sets out to investigate the racial counter-stereotype in *24* and how it becomes contained by, and embedded in, post-racial discourse by making the invisible visible. Ono (2010:230) asserts that whether flying under the flag of 'colour-blindness', 'multiculturalism', or 'racial tolerance', contemporary post-racial discourse cloaks or masks the reality of racism and oppression. It redeploys from the traditional racial discourse both racial chauvinism and white supremacy, but this is now portrayed in a rather elusive, inferential, yet pervasive manner. In the following I will elaborate on an important discourse of contemporary US identity – 'the discourse of whiteness' – as this often becomes intertwined with the notion of the post-racial. Furthermore, the discourse contains certain traits that showcase key aspects of how racial counter-stereotypes may work in a popular television text.

The significance of whiteness

In his conceptualization of the counter-stereotype, Macé asserts that the representation of people of colour who act in a counter-stereotypical manner is instructed by the hegemonic point of view delineated by Franz Fanon (1952) in *Black Skin, White Masks*. There, Fanon accounts for the elementary characteristic that resides in the racial counter-stereotype – the imitation of whiteness. He explains the narcissistic indifference that exists in the colonial relation between black and white people. And yet, Fanon (1986:221) writes, “the Negro knows there is a difference. He wants it [...] The former slave needs a challenge to his humanity.” In the absence of such a challenge, Fanon (1986:221) argues, the colonized can only imitate, never identify. This is a distinction that can be further explained by the psychoanalyst Annie Reich: “It is imitation [...] when the child holds the newspaper like his father. It is identification when the child learns to read (Bhabba 1993:120).” In line with this, a key trait of racial counter-stereotypes is the imitation and taking up of white mores and norms. Hence, the appropriation of whiteness enables a character to act counter-stereotypically. Aspects related to non-whites’ performance of whiteness thus become a focal point in my examination of Muslim counter-stereotypes. I should underline, however, that this study seeks to avoid operating with a simplistic understanding of the notion of the racial counter-stereotype that lumps all people of colour into one group.

The racial counter-stereotype is connected to Daniel Bernardi’s (2001:xxi) understanding of whiteness as a performance about ‘passing as white’ – that it has to do with ‘acting’, ‘looking’, or ‘making’ white. A counter-stereotypical performance becomes therefore influenced by the desire to ‘pass as white’. A pivotal function of the discourse of whiteness is to give the ethnic and racial groups that are considered white an assurance of cultural superiority and symbolic power. The discourse can persuade human beings into believing whites are the norm for humankind. People of colour who try to ‘pass as white’

appropriate the cultural codes associated with whiteness in their striving to be included in the norm. The discourse of whiteness exercises a vital influence on counter-stereotypes as a disciplinary guidance for performativity. In the United States this discourse is entrenched in the implicit belief that whites almost single-handedly created America and that their economic success is due to their initiative, higher intellect and superior morality (Sanchez 2008:103).

To provide an understanding of how the power of whiteness has worked historically in the United States, I will give a brief account of what has constituted the focal point for whiteness as an area of study – David Roediger’s (2007) seminal work, *The Wages of Whiteness*. A study of the foundation of the white working class in the nineteenth century in the United States, Roediger’s work rehearses the history of the ‘whitening’ of Irish immigrants as a key case to comprehend whiteness as a social construction. Whiteness was here a compensatory wage that worked for the Irish immigrants to disrupt Chinese-Irish or black-Irish identifications in the context of industrial exploitation. Roediger’s project is a rearticulation of class struggle as an antiracist project. His approach to ‘whiteness’ focuses on a gesture of historical retrieval of not-yet-white ethnics, whose experience in the New World can be perceived not as one of ‘being’, but ‘becoming’ white.

Moving on to examining the counter-stereotype in relation to *24*, I will start by outlining a more general discussion of Western – and particularly United States and Hollywood’s – representations of Muslim peoples and Islam.

Unfavourable renderings of Muslims

Edward W. Said’s (1995) *Orientalism* is often used as a theoretical point of departure for studies of Western media texts that render Islam. His examination of nineteenth century literature and art works disclose some disturbing outcomes of Western encounters with the Orient. A key point in this study is that the Orient is constructed through Western

representations. Pictures of Turkish baths by renowned painters invoked for example racial hierarchies, where whiteness was most desirable and highly valued. Said reveals how Western images of the Orient established knowledge of the cultural Other and informed the Western self-perception as rational, developed and superior to the Orient.

John L. Esposito (1999) stresses the variety, different traditions and historical experiences of Muslim societies. In dominant discourses in US and European news and popular media, however, Muslims of Middle Eastern origin tend to be portrayed using negative stereotypical clichés and generalizations (Karim 2006; Pintak 2006; Richardson 2004; Miller 2006). The threat that a ‘State of Islam’ is furtively being established in Western secularized countries is a frightening scenario alluded to and brought about recurrently by certain Western political fractions. Said’s (1997) work on the limits of media framing regarding the understanding of Muslims and Islam provides a detailed assessment of the ways Western media contribute to knowledge of the Islamic world – often by turning to distortions and misrepresentation. Said (1997:xii) argues that a typical feature of Western media when representing Islam is to relate it to aggression, as if aggression stems from Islam. Islam’s role in hijackings and terrorism seems to play increasingly on Western consciousness, and ill-willed generalizations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of a foreign culture in Western countries. Particularly over the last few decades there has developed a set of stereotypical visual signifiers in Western media’s imaginaries of ‘Islamic fundamentalism’, conveying a vast amount of information without verbalizing it. These include the *hijab* worn by Muslim women, the turban and cloak worn by Muslim men, people prostrating in Islamic prayer, Arabesque designs, scimitars, deserts, camels, etc. (Karim 2003:68).

Post 9/11, the divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’ has deepened in both Middle Eastern and Western media – a dichotomy that has helped to strengthen simplified ideas of a

collective self versus the cultural Other (Sisler 2008). Muslims and Arabs living in the United States have arguably suffered from a kind of collective punishment after the spectacular terror attack on the country carried out by Al-Qaeda. Bonilla Silva (2010:194), for example, draws an analogy between the historical position of US Arabs post 9/11 and that of Japanese Americans during World War II. They may suffer a collective stigma, being regarded as terrorists, as fundamentalists, as uncivilized.

In the following I will outline *24*'s official explanation of why the producers chose to include positive Muslim characters. But first I will briefly present relevant research in the field indicating how Hollywood has represented and represents Muslim and Arab characters.

For the last four decades Jack G. Shaheen has been the main contributor to this field. According to Shaheen (1984:4-5), the traditional Muslim Arab stereotype in US television resides in Hollywood's 'Middle East', and he demonstrates how its image is easily recognizable through recurring visual elements. In an analysis of how Muslims and Arabs are portrayed post 9/11 in Hollywood television shows, Shaheen (2008:45) concludes that the profusion of damaging Muslim stereotypes continues post 9/11, with the exception of *Lost*'s (*Touchstone Television/Bad Robots/ABC* 2004-2010) Iraqi character, Sayid Jarrah. Yet, I find that Shaheen neglects several other Muslim characters portrayed in a quite positive way in the shows he analyses – for example Darwyn Al-Sayeed in *Sleeper Cell* (*Showtime* 2005-2006) and Nadia Yassir in *24*.

Hollywood occasionally exhibits ambivalence towards its use of stereotypes when representing racial and ethnic minorities. I will point out that when *24* was confronted with accusations from Muslim interest groups about its stereotyping of Muslims (see Parry 2009; CAIR Chicago 2005), the producers and writers declared in various US media an intention to change their ways (Ackerman 2005). Simultaneously, however, they defended the way they had portrayed Muslims up to then. For instance, the writers claimed to counter the depiction

of Muslim terrorists by showing contrasting situations (Bennett 2008). The racial witch-hunt against Muslims in Season 6, initiated by the White House, was countered by the storyline of a wrongful arrest by the FBI of the Director of the Islamic American Alliance. Furthermore, at the time Season 4 was broadcast, the producers assured Muslim advocacy groups that the portrayal would become more even-handed. According to Scott Grogin, a *Fox* network spokesman, this was reflected in the positive portrayals of Muslims in Season 6 (see Reddy 2007). This shift involved the inclusion of a few 'heroic' Muslim characters, such as Hamri Al-Assad – a former Islamic terrorist leader who becomes Jack Bauer's partner in the hunt for Islamic terrorists. Muslims are depicted along similar lines in Season 8. The 'stockpile' Islamic terrorists are predominant, but additionally the storyline about a peace-oriented Muslim President and his family constitutes a crucial part of the overall narrative.

Many Muslim interest groups lodged complaints about Season 4 and the storyline of a 'sleeping' terrorist cell in the guise of an ordinary Muslim family living in Los Angeles. For example, the Muslim Council of Britain was so angered by the theme that it asked the media regulator, *Ofcom*, to examine the TV serial thoroughly, accusing the show of breaching broadcasting codes by misrepresenting ethnic minorities (Doward 2005). *Fox* responded to the criticism by announcing an offering of public service announcements during the season on local television stations in the United States, funded by *The Council on American-Islamic Relations*. *Fox* cooperated with CAIR to produce spot announcements in which Kiefer Sutherland, the star of *24*, cautioned the show's viewers not to stereotype Muslims (Halse 2013:5). Despite this effort, co-creator and executive producer Robert Cochran claims that the team did not alter the contents of Season 4, because the representation of the family as terrorists was 'balanced' (Dilullo 2007:17).

Before I proceed to the textual analysis where I examine how *24* represents two counter-stereotypical Muslim characters, I would like to introduce Nadia Yassir and Omar

Hassan in terms of the similar character traits they possess that points to a counter-stereotypical representation. Hence, they should constitute the opposite of what Shaheen (2008:25) describes as contemporary Hollywood's projection of Muslim and Arab stereotypes, depicted as "the unkempt, unscrupulous enemy Other"[...] as Villains, Terrorists, Maidens, Sheikhs, and Cameos." Yassir and Hassan, Muslims committed to combating Islamic terrorists, are both part of the season's main cast, have a steadfast belief in Western ideals and values, and are prominently placed in *24*'s official promotional material (Islamic terrorists are given very limited exposure here). Both actors are non-white, but neither is Muslim or from the Middle East. This insensitivity to casting Muslims to play Muslims is unproblematic when viewed from the perspective of *24*'s story world, where it is very difficult here to identify distinctions among the characters labelled as Muslims. The producers and directors make few, if any, distinctions between Arabs, Arab Americans and Muslim Arabs, between Muslims and Muslim Americans. These subtleties are almost always blended together.⁷⁶ In this way, *24*'s stories about the Muslim characters with Middle Eastern origin seem to confirm Esposito's (1999) suggestion that stories about the Muslim world all too often assume the existence of a monolithic Islam out there somewhere.

A model image of the counter-stereotype

According to Shaheen (2008:47), the few times Muslim and Arab-American women appear in contemporary Hollywood television entertainment, they are usually silent and submissive. Or they surface briefly as wild, repressed women. Yassir is at odds with this description. The character's departure from established ways of depicting Muslim women is emphasized by Marisol Nichols, the actress playing Yassir. Nichols told the press that she had been assured that there would be no stereotyping of her character, as Nichols made it clear that she would

⁷⁶ The terms Muslim and Arab are not inevitably comparable as not all Muslims are Arab and not all Arabs are Muslim. Furthermore, neither Arab nor Muslim is a culture, and Muslim is not a race.

not be party to ‘typecasting’ (Jacobs 2007). The character, Yassir, was born in Pakistan and raised in America, and is featured in every episode in Season 6. To a certain extent, this character conveys the opposite of the visual signifiers in Western media’s imaginaries of Islamic fundamentalism. She is portrayed as an attractive and career-oriented woman in keeping with how principal female characters are often presented in US television series: young, single, with model-looks, highly educated and working in a major American city in open office spaces that constitute an ideal arena for encounters with the opposite sex. The character seems to suggest that US television shows’ traditional portrayal of stereotypical female bit-part Muslims and Arabs is now remedied, as the representation is in accordance with the postracial discourse’s reproduction of the old mythology of US exceptionalism under capitalism: by pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps through achievements based on a hard work combined with ability and talent, the American dream of success is attainable for everyone (Ono 2010:228).

Nichols is of Mexican/Latino origin. The decision by *24* to cast her in a major role as a Muslim of Middle Eastern origin is in line with the elusiveness of the US postracial discourse. The use of a racial counter-stereotype maintains a purportedly antiracist stance (Ono 2010:229). Nichols, whose racial and ethnic background is inconsistent with the character she plays, is set to facilitate the representation of an inclusive model of assimilation.⁷⁷ I would argue that there is a paradox in the proclaimed sensitivity displayed by *24* and Nichols, in view of the prevailing asymmetry in representational power in Hollywood’s entertainment. Because of this asymmetry, casting of a non-member of a minority group in the United States has come to be regarded as an insult by minoritarian ethno-racial communities, as it implies

⁷⁷ The United States constitutes a special case regarding multiracialism and its proliferation. Multiracialism and multiculturalism originated in this country from the failure of ‘Americanization’ policies to succeed in replacing ethno-racial cultures with an American one. The resurgence and reaffirmation of ethno-racial identities in the United States resulted in a multiculturalism that led to a quest for ‘public status’ for ethno-racial identities (Joppke 1996:449).

that the community is unworthy of self-representation and that no one in it is capable of representing them (Shohat and Stam 1994:190). The problem with *24*'s casting is that it forwards the message that if the actress is non-white she will do.



Illustration 1: "I like not having the woman be the bad guy," the actress Nichols says about her character: "Strength does not equal bad" (Bennet 2008:24).

Yassir's acquaintance with Islamic culture is addressed in the first episode. In a split-screen conversation she is engaging key Islamic terrorist Abu Fayed on the telephone. He threatens to withdraw from the agreement he has made with Yassir and the Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU) to give them the location of another Muslim terrorist. Replying to this, Yassir changes to speak in Arabic and asks him where his honour is. Her communication with the terrorist about 'honour' suggests that the character cannot easily be labelled as a Western ingroup member, as the expression signifies an origin from the same cultural community as the Islamic terrorist. Furthermore, 'honour' is a cliché used in Western discourse to

characterize a key Muslim trait, and in this context it denotes a dedication to an alien and archaic value system. The concept of ‘honour’ (*izza* in Arabic) is nevertheless central in most Muslim cultures, particularly in the Middle East, and means that every individual has an obligation to defend the honour of the family and the community. However, according to Western public discourse, Muslim ‘honour’ allegedly lies behind disturbing developments in contemporary multiracial Western societies – especially the so-called ‘honour killings’, which has aroused intense public debate in, for example, Germany and The Netherlands (Chapman 2007; Korteweg and Yurdakul 2009).



Illustration 2: Yassir stands accused of being the mole inside CTU, hence a white male co-worker tortures her during interrogation.

In line with *24* being a show with a generic and narrative format that in general leaves women with little to do, in the first half of the season Yassir is given limited narrative space. At this stage, her part in the narrative seems exclusively to ensure that the rest of the CTU

staff adheres to the male director's orders and directives. Based on Janet McCabe's (2007:158) assertion that women in *24* can be divided into two categories, either as vulnerable damsels needing rescue or helpmates assisting the progress of male action, I find that Yassir is firmly placed in the second category. Yet, in episode fourteen a switch of mode in the representation occurs when she is put in a dire situation that befittingly needs male rescue. This scene, where she is tortured by a co-worker, is decisive, as in the aftermath she moves from the fringes to the centre of the narrative, becoming involved in subplots which have a function in the overall narrative thrust – metamorphosing into a counter-stereotype.

In the lead-up to the torture scene, she is accused of being a mole inside the CTU because of her background. In a disturbing scene, she is tortured to force her to reveal information about the terrorists' whereabouts. It is standard procedure in *24*'s diegetic world for CTU agents to apply torture, but until now it has not been used on one of their own. As other CTU workers watch the unfolding drama on their computer screens, an agent becomes violent during the interrogation by taking a stranglehold on her (see illustration 2). The delineation of the character as a quasi-masculine and thoroughly professional CTU analyst breaks down here, as her face suddenly reveals an abundance of sweat. Yassir's powerlessness is underscored by the white, male torturer standing in the dark part of the room, whereas her position in the room is highly lit, suggesting she is there to be scrutinized not only by the interrogator, but by the other CTU members watching their screens. The sense of terror is accentuated by distressing sound effects. Another agent, Milo Pressman, who has previously exhibited an interest in her, intervenes and prevents the interrogation from proceeding.

In the next episode information is retrieved which documents Yassir's innocence. In this episode, Yassir seems to be back to normal; she continues to carry out her duties as if nothing had happened. Still, the depiction of the way Yassir apparently ignores, or suppresses,

what she has been exposed to defies common sense. That she shortly thereafter becomes romantically involved with Pressman is unfathomable. In this sequence, a moment of interracial passion is underscored by extradiegetic music, as they embrace, kissing fervently, in a protracted close-up shot.

The representation of Yassir's behaviour can be explained by the notion of the racial counter-stereotype. As a counter-stereotype Yassir could almost 'pass as white', with the fact that she is a Muslim being reduced to the merely incidental, due to the character's appropriation of a white set of mores and norms. Yet, Yassir can only do this by ignoring Muslims' experiences of day-to-day discrimination in the United States. It is the character's failure to question the injustices done to her, and additionally her efforts to incarnate white standards of normalcy that enable the character to function as a counter-stereotype. The things the character has to sacrifice in order to pass as white undermine its credibility in the position it occupies in the narrative. Principal characters in quality television serial drama are constructed along the lines of the 'individual' – a particular, more complex and individuated character construction situated in time and space. A few episodes later, Yassir even develops a close relationship with her torturer. We viewers cannot 'understand' her behaviour. The rendering of such 'flaws' in character raises questions about the motive behind *24*'s efforts in including a 'positive' Muslim main character. In effect, Yassir gives an image of a difference that does not make any difference.

True to the television genre of action series, *24* is characterized by rugged individualism and a male hero capable of applying extreme tactics in the line of duty. In *24*, this is pitted against another essential feature of the genre: the fate of the individual 'under' technologization and bureaucratization (Miller 2008:29). In connection with the sacking of the CTU Director (episode nineteen), Yassir accepts the position as Acting Director and becomes notably more conjoined with the negative features commonly associated with

bureaucrats. In contrast to the former male Director, Yassir's performance is marred by her inability to make decisions, relying on others – especially male figures with authority – to tell her what to do. She is portrayed as one who strictly follows the organization's official guidelines, rules and laws. Hence, she becomes one of a category of people who, in the *24* universe, are seldom rewarded.

Women in *24* must display unquestioning loyalty and obedience to the male hero, rather than to the organization (McCabe 2007:156). Yassir's gender implies narrative punishment as she repeatedly refuses to adhere to Bauer's advice and guidelines. In the *24* universe, Bauer constitutes the iconic centre of the story world. He is the superior, and his take on a situation always proves to be correct. Appointed as Director, Yassir becomes not only an obstacle to Bauer, but an antagonist. The following thumbnail synopsis of a storyline in episode twenty demonstrates the point: Bauer's traumatized girlfriend is being brought back to the CTU for interrogation, as she carries vital information on the whereabouts of Chinese terrorists. A psychiatric specialist is called in to shock her out of her catatonic state. Bauer, however, underlines that he is capable of retrieving information from her. When Yassir is presented with this possibility, the doctor tells her that it is not her call to make. Submissive to, and contained by, this expert, Yassir stresses the need to follow protocol. Bauer manages to break out of a holding cell, and crucial information is obtained when he manages to get his girlfriend to talk. Yassir admits that she should have stood up to the psychiatrist. However, the representation of her behavioural mode does not alter notably, as she later refuses to listen to Bauer several times – a *modus operandi* which proves fatal to both civilians and members of the CTU.

Yassir endures profound narrative punishment when Pressman, the co-worker she kissed, is executed. The CTU staff is being held hostage by Chinese terrorists, who demand to be told who is in command. The shot first centres on Yassir – who gives an image of a damsel

in distress, too terrified and weak to respond – cutting to a short sequence depicting other CTU personnel's reactions and then back to the CTU Director, who remains silent. Pressman then claims to be the Director, whereupon he is shot in the forehead.

The scene can be interpreted as an articulation of punishment of the white male for the transgressive act of inciting an intimate relationship with a woman of colour (Foster 1999:184). Yet, in terms of counter-hegemonic politics, this interracial pairing is far more contained and less transgressive than the pairing of a white woman with a man of colour. Thus, *24*'s portrayal of Yassir and her narrative punishment by becoming a scapegoat more likely hinge on the character's double 'Othering', as Yassir is marked by two labels of categorization that prefigure an Othering process. In *24*, both Muslims and women are generally confined to the narrative margins, and are usually defined as a problem. When these labelling devices are present in a single character, who, what is more, lays claim to the narrative centre stage, it disturbs the white and patriarchal culture's position in the narrative – that of the dominant group in *24*. This group's occupation of the centre stage is based on the fixing of the Other – to separate what is seen as threatening and disturbing from what is regarded as acceptable and legitimate.

24's representation of Yassir's loyalty towards this group and her non-acknowledgment of her own shortcomings and wrongdoings and, more importantly, the fact that she does not appear to be affected by the undermining demeanour and attacks by white male co-workers, allow her to remain included in the ingroup of American characters working at the CTU. Yet, Yassir is seldom represented in a way that can be associated with 'Americanness', i.e., of being American – defined by traits such as initiative, high intellect and superior morality. Instead, she is depicted as an ideal incarnation of a racial counter-stereotype.

The counter-stereotypical Muslim President

So far we have considered the representation of Yassir as a model image of a counter-stereotype. The arguments presented there are further elaborated in the analysis of a second Muslim character in *24*, Omar Hassan. Before moving to my analysis of key instances in Season 8 involving Hassan, I will provide a brief account of the main narrative in which he figures.

Omar Hassan, President of the Islamic Republic of Kamistan, a fictitious Middle Eastern country, is about to sign a peace treaty with the United States. The domestic opposition, however, perceiving this as siding with the Western enemy, attempt to assassinate him to undermine the agreement. Hassan, who is married and has a daughter, is romantically involved with an American woman, a journalist. The President's brother and the opposition know about the affair, and they take advantage of it to frame the reporter to be used as a scapegoat in their assassination plan. The assassination attempt fails, however. Later in the storyline, Hassan surrenders himself to the terrorists in an effort to stop a nuclear attack on US soil, and is executed.

I find few visual signifiers that link Hassan to the stereotypical image of Muslims in Western popular culture. He has, for example, the style and appearance typical of Western elites: trimmed beard and slicked-back hair, elegantly tailored dark suit (see illustration 3). Anil Kapoor, the actor who plays Hassan, explains the producers' intention to avoid the Muslim. When Kapoor, of Indian origin, agreed to play Omar Hassan, he wanted to make sure he would not be typecast. Kapoor considers Hassan to be a good person who has come to the United States on a peace mission.⁷⁸ That his character is a peacemaker was what sold him on playing the role, he says (Lacob 2009). Hassan is represented as an idealistic, liberal political leader with firm ethical principles and oriented toward Western values. This is underlined by

⁷⁸ After having co-starred in *24* as President Omar Hassan, Kapoor plays the Indian version of the character Jack Bauer in an Indian adaptation of the show.

his American counterpart, President Allison Taylor, who states that he is different from other Middle Eastern leaders in that respect.



Illustration 3: There is a striking visual similarity between Anil Kapoor as the game show host Prem Kumar in Slumdog Millionaire (2008) and as President Hassan in 24.

Hassan and the reporter share a mutual love, which is highlighted by close-up shots of them in an affectionate conversation with moments of silence between each sentence (episode four). This sequence captures precious seconds before they have to part. 24's application of a clichéd trope of heterosexual romance is underlined by Hassan's gesture, as he, in a moment of hesitation after having stated the impossible nature of their relationship, grasps her arm when she is about to leave and halts her for a few seconds. 24's delineation of this romantic side to Hassan sets him apart from Hollywood's typical depictions of male Muslims. The relationship he has developed with the reporter illustrates a secular and 'Western' understanding of love, not the stereotypical portrayal of the backward, male Muslim's indulgence in sexual excess (Karim 2003:62).

In contrast to his brother, the President exhibits a firm belief in the principles of Western democracy and the rule of law. Consequently, he is convinced of the necessity to transform Kamistan into a more secularized country. A crucial step toward this goal is the peace treaty so that the United States will lift economic sanctions. Here, Hassan confesses his marital infidelity to American authorities, admitting to the CTU Director that he gave the reporter a key card to his private residence. He discloses this sensitive information to the Director 'in the name of justice', as he is convinced of his mistress' innocence of the assassination attempt. The Director asks if this certainty is based exclusively on personal feelings, and Hassan confirms this. Unconvinced, the Director still considers the woman a prime suspect. The abiding trust that a President of a Middle Eastern country exhibits for an American intelligence operative, on the one hand, and his white American mistress, on the other, while being accused by the West of developing nuclear materials, suggests that he is both naive and neglectful of his duties as President, placing private matters before national interests.

24's representation articulates how the character's counter-stereotypical performance centres on an emphasis on 'Americanness', as the character on this and other occasions displays a deference towards American national values like individualism and US patriotism. Furthermore, if the sensitive information he conveys were to become a public matter, it would have calamitous political ramifications for the people supporting Hassan's political cause. Yet, *24* portrays him as an honourable, but unwitting character, who is guided by his personal feelings. This is underlined by what the US President's trusted adviser labels as Hassan's two major attributes: 'passion' and 'charisma'. Accordingly, it is these qualities that have made an improbable career as a political reformist in Kamistan a success. However, Hassan is not depicted in line with attributes commonly associated with Western political elites, such as strategic and rational thinking. Hassan exhibits a white performance through his adaptation to

a set of normative cultural practices and symbols that are in alignment with whiteness. Still, a striking flaw in Hassan's efforts to 'pass as white' is the character's display of unchecked passion, which is at odds with the essence of the aspiration to whiteness: an absence of affect (Dyer 1997:213).

The last episode in which Hassan is featured (episode sixteen) is pivotal and demonstrates how the character's closure epitomizes his position within *24*'s diegetic world. President Hassan has been taken hostage by Islamic terrorists, and the episode starts with him being transported to a safe house where he is to be executed in a live transmission over the Internet. Hassan is hauled out of the trunk of a car and led to a murky room, a defeated figure with bowed head and hair in disarray. Even though the room's intended function is to be used as a space where the terrorists can hide from the government agencies, rays of light enter the room from a window and light up Hassan's face and body. Because of this error the CTU analysts manage to detect the terrorists' location.

The Islamic terrorists' expressed aim is to force Hassan to 'confess his crimes'. Therefore, the interrogator and lead villain, Samir Mehran, tortures Hassan using a combination of beatings, electric shocks and chemical injections, but without success. Still, the way in which Hassan responds to torture is in some respects Othered. How he reacts physically bears little resemblance with how the hero in *24*, Bauer, responds to similar torture. Bauer's face is not covered in sweat, nor does he shiver, tremble, cry or scream. In the sequence where the President is subjected to electric shocks the actor throws himself from the chair onto the floor in a very dramatic fashion; a type of response bordering on slapstick comedy. White heroes like Bauer remain calm under extreme duress. Hassan lacks the white hero's hardness and firmness of the body – traits that are defining of whiteness. But in spite of giving an image of physical weakness, he displays firm will power, refusing to give in to the terrorists' demands, an attribute that also characterizes white people (Dyer 1997:37). Yet, the

manifest shortcomings in the character's striving to 'pass as white' suggest that many viewers of *24* will find it very difficult to identify with him. Thus, in my reading, Hassan is portrayed in line with the notion of the racial counter-stereotype, which in Western popular culture draws extensively on the discourse of whiteness. And like all racial counter-stereotypes, he can never completely incarnate the qualities associated with white people, as the character's simulation of whites' cultural practices falls short of the mark.



Illustration 4: President Hassan in front of the Kamistani flag: a softer version of the iconography of Islamic terrorists' beheading of an 'infidel'.

The last scene featuring the President shows his corpse, his throat slit, the back of his head resting against a Kamistani flag on the wall, and his face turned upwards as if gazing towards the light that shines down on him from the skylight (see illustration 4). All colour has left Hassan's cheeks, his pallor and congealing blood establishing his death. This image suggests that the character no longer constitutes a counter-stereotype, as the impediments that

hindered his access to qualities of whiteness now appear to be removed. The President's death is marked by northern light from above, as if the character has metamorphosed into a white person. Northern light, described as light that comes into a room in daytime through a large north-facing window, is viewed as the superior light. The north is here the epitome of the high, cold, places that promoted the vigour, cleanliness, piety and enterprise of whiteness (Salt 1983:329). His death becomes conjoined with him looking up and into this light. This suggests that he is graced by the whiteness of this light from above, and like white people Hassan now seems to be the recipient of, and enlightened by, the northern light. Hence, the President's death can be taken to signal a moment of grace, of God's blessing. This is in line with Bauer's reaction when he enters the room and bears witness to Hassan's fate. He kneels down in front of Hassan's dead body, reaches out his arms and lifts Hassan up and towards him before closing his eyes – a gesture which signifies a sacral, Christian rite. Furthermore, it suggests that Bauer and Hassan have a special bonding, even though there appears to have been very little opportunity for them to become friends.

Omar Hassan belongs to a small group of heroic and trustworthy characters in *24*, defined by a willingness to sacrifice themselves for what the serial delineates as a set of unquestionable and elevated values and moral standards. I regard these standards and the cultural codes and symbols that sustain them, which have an implicit presence in the show, as guided by the US discourse of whiteness – a discourse that is linked to 'Americanness' and US nationalism. In this case, it is oriented towards labelling favourable ingroup characteristics and virtues of US national identity that elevate and set this group apart. In *24*, the hierarchical relationship between the United States and Kamistan is taken for granted. Through Hassan, *24* can denounce Kamistan, and thereby, indirectly, Islamic Middle Eastern countries – for clearly failing to meet the standards of the United States. This theme is made explicit in the scene where Hassan confers with the US President. President Taylor addresses a disquieting

development in Hassan's country. Hassan has recently ordered a crackdown of the opposition there, and the dialogue illustrates how he evaluates his homeland in comparison with the United States. Defending his decision to take the necessary steps, Hassan asserts that Taylor does not understand. Hers is an open society governed by the rule of law; his is closed, and the only real law is power. I posit that this counter-stereotypical character is used to confer legitimacy on the US discourse of whiteness; a discourse which, in *24*, sets the United States apart from Kamistan and the Middle East, based on what it highlights as superior achievements in science, humanism and entrepreneurship.

A difference that makes no difference

In seasons following the accusation by Muslim interest groups of *24*'s stereotyping of Muslims, the serial appears to be more ambiguous and contradictory in its representations. The two characters that I examine are personifications of success, a President and a leader of a major government agency, respectively. This would seem to signal that the serial has moved away from the more ideologically motivated one-sidedness of its Muslim images, as the delineation appears ideologically conflicted. However, I argue that my close reading of *24* reveals that the new positive Muslim characters resulting from the producers', writers' and actors' manifest aim to achieve a more even-handed portrayal of Muslims, should be regarded as flawed. Yassir and Hassan are constructed as Muslims of Middle Eastern origin who are deprived of empowering cultural references to their background. Instead, these characters are represented in line with a white set of cultural practices and codes that are simulated and imitated. As shown in my analysis, their efforts to 'pass as white' fall short.

The producers may have had 'good intentions' of depicting a wider range of Muslim characters in order to meet the critics' demands. However, balancing or correcting pejorative stereotypes takes more than introducing positive depictions, as there is reason to be cautious

of positive representations of the racial and ethnic Other. Replacing a dominant stereotypical mode of representation does not necessarily escape the binary structure of stereotyping or unlock the complex dialectics of power and subordination through which Muslim and Arab identities have been constructed historically by Western imaginaries. For example, Edward W. Said (1995) is as suspicious of supposedly positive representations of the Orient as he is of more straightforward negative representations. Indeed, within postcolonial theory the character of the 'noble savage', a representation that shares important traits with the racial counter-stereotype, has appeared repeatedly. Stuart Hall describes the 'noble savage' as racial characters in Western texts who appear 'noble' – by assisting Westerners – but who are still ultimately marked by their absolute racial difference (Hall 1996b:310-312). Consequently, what appears as a 'positive representation' in fact sustains a discourse of essential difference.

24's representation of the characters suggests that they comprise a difference that does not make any difference. The delineation of Yassir's ostensible acceptance of the injustices done to her by white male co-workers and her efforts to incarnate white standards of normality, support that assertion. In comparison, Hassan displays to a larger extent heroic qualities, as he carries out heroic deeds: saving the white hero's life and sacrificing his own for a greater good. But, both characters share an inability to keep up their appearance while under pressure, for instance in the torture scenes. Furthermore, Yassir frequently becomes portrayed in line with the gendered cliché of a damsel in distress – marked by the show's general inclination to portray women in a sexist manner (see McCabe 2007). Hassan is a President who seeks to transform and adapt his Islamic homeland to the West's standard of democracy, rule of law and way of life. In the analysis I argue that a discourse of whiteness which has 'Americanness' as a focal point is mediated through this character and therefore gains credibility. Yet, the President's efforts to embody and display the qualities associated with white people seems somehow deficient and unconvincing. Yassir and Hassan constitute

personifications of success, a President and a leader of a major agency, but despite perfectly good intentions the characters fail in comparison to their white peers – in conducting their duties and in foreseeing events as their white US counterparts do.

Paul Gilroy (2000:37) states that the postracial refers to a future in which racialized hierarchies, racial notions and the dominance of whiteness is overthrown. I would additionally suggest that the notion of the postracial produces the category of the acceptable dark-skinned Other, suited for today. In this context, the representational mode for Hollywood's entertainment is recurrently the racial counter-stereotype. This character representation is in adherence with what Hall (1996a:444) describes as the new essentially 'good black subject' – a subject that allows the concept of race to be “crossed and recrossed by the categories of class, gender and ethnicity.” This subject either renders blackness and brownness invisible, or it celebrates exceptional blackness supported by white values – as the privileged viewing position for perceiving race is middle class whiteness (Gray 2004:165).

In my view, the representation of the characters is guided by a hegemonic point of view in line with the fixity that exists in relation to how the Muslim Other is perceived in Western discourse, even as the United States and Hollywood's television shows supposedly now have entered the postracial era. In *24*, Muslim characters from the Middle East are usually reduced to narrow and limiting roles (the Islamic terrorist), and if not, they are rendered in a vacuum, as though their cultural and ethnic background does not exist (the counter-stereotypes). Thus, the serial to a large degree follows along the lines of how Hollywood has traditionally chosen to portray Muslims and Arabs, where pejorative stereotypical portrayals are the stock-in-trade (cf. Michalak 1988). The problem is that *24*, in line with the contemporary Hollywood trend of accommodating representational modes to a postracial discourse, claims to be different.

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Article 4: Online fans of 24

Textual poaching, gamekeeping and the counter-stereotype: US and Norwegian online fans' perceptions of positive portrayals of Muslims in 24

From the periphery to the mainstream

Active fans of popular media proliferate in today's wired world. In the analogue era, however, when the textual poacher became a key concept in the study of fan culture, fans were a marginal and contested segment of the audience. The textual poacher is one who seeks to appropriate media contents to her own ends. Fan scholars today recognize that appropriation involves the adoption of some core premises in the original work and reworking of others to accommodate the fan's interests (Jenkins 2007:362). This argument rests on the same premise as Henry Jenkins' (1992) original notion of poaching, whereby the reworking fans do is undertaken to accommodate progressive interests, as fan practices are bound up with larger democratizing social and cultural forces (Bury 2008a:59). Because the status of the textual poacher in today's television industry has been repositioned from the periphery to the mainstream, it becomes relevant to investigate whether fans' semiotic practices, as fan studies have demonstrated repeatedly, are still manifested in a progressive engagement with television texts in the digital era.

The expansion of multichannel television and the advent of the DVD and of network-based discussion forums have created new opportunities for viewers to engage with fan practices. However, television producers look for ways to profit from user-generated content from Internet publishing such as message boards. Enlisting more viewers as dedicated and reliable consumers of a television show and its ancillary products is a primary motive for corporations to provide arenas for fans' interpretative practices. This emphasizes how

important parts of fan culture now find themselves placed within the corporate walled garden, illustrated by the fact that Internet marketing companies now usually host and maintain ‘official’ message boards for television series (Larsen 2010:157). The advent of the Internet has, on the other hand, seemingly enabled more reciprocal relationships between fans and television production companies, as those who create texts to some extent pay attention to fans’ online readings and shape their productions accordingly.

The current article presents a critical investigation of the cultural politics of poaching regarding online television fan communities, as it seeks to address what consequences fans’ movement from the periphery to the mainstream using digital media might have for their meaning-making practices. This is accomplished through an empirical study of how fans interpret the main characters in the television serial *24* (*Imagine Entertainment /Fox* 2001-2010); these characters have a background similar to Islamic terrorists, but occupy an opposite position in the serial’s diegesis. The study includes a comparison of how two online fan communities, in the US and Norway, respectively, perceive selected Muslim characters from the Middle East in *24*. Comparing two online fan communities from different parts of the West may generate knowledge and insight concerning potential cultural and social variations in the semiotic practices of fans. This may be a fruitful approach, especially because influential scholarly works on media fan culture have shown a tendency to portray Western fans of popular television series and films as a homogeneous and specialized interpretive community (e.g., Jenkins 1992, 1998; Fiske 1992). An analysis of online readings with participating fans is carried out. The selected Muslim characters are labelled as counter-stereotypes, as in *24* they occupy a position opposite to the prevailing stereotype by proposing a reverse performance. In recent seasons of *24*, most Muslims are still delineated as stereotypical Islamic terrorists. Nevertheless, the show’s inclusion of Muslim counter-stereotypes denotes a strategy to circumvent allegations of stereotyping.

The counter-stereotype is conceptualized as an attempt to negate a stereotypical view of a racial or ethnic group by presenting a member of the featured group who has traits exemplifying the opposite of the stereotype.⁷⁹ In popular US television serials, counter-stereotypes are usually members of the middle or upper middle class and hold prestigious jobs, occupying roles as main characters. Ideally, they should heighten viewers' awareness that a member of the portrayed group may not fit into a stereotypical category, as the depiction largely delineates traits that exemplify and underline the opposite of the stereotypical traits commonly associated with the group.

It is problematic to operate with a simplistic and common-sense-like understanding of the notion of counter-stereotypes and how they work in popular television serial texts. In other words, there is reason to be cautious of positive representations of the Other. For instance, Edward W. Said (1995) is just as suspicious of supposedly positive representations of the Orient as he is of more straight forward negative representations. Indeed, within postcolonial theory the character of the 'noble savage' has appeared frequently, a character that interrelates with the counter-stereotype. Stuart Hall (1996:310-312) describes the 'noble savage' as racial characters in Western texts who appear 'noble' – by assisting Westerners – but who are still ultimately marked by their absolute racial difference.

Bearing these critical points in mind, how online fan communities perceive the counter-stereotype can nevertheless be apprehended as an indicator of how successful the show has been in its efforts to heighten viewers' awareness that the portrayed group comprises more than radical Islamists. However, perceptions are additionally dependent on what fans bring to the text, e.g. the individual fan's background, personal skills and her and the fan community's horizons of expectation. The article examines whether the counter-stereotype, a positive representation, succeeds or fails in being read as such.

⁷⁹ Éric Macé (2009) defines counter-stereotypes as members of racial minority groups that disconfirm existing cultural stereotypes by exemplifying the opposite of stereotypical traits commonly associated with the featured group.

Media fans and textual poaching

Media fans are considered a specialized interpretive community with a specific mode of cultural consumption; they often attempt to use texts for their own purposes, which can at times differ greatly from the intentions of a given text's producers (Lehtonen 2000:148). During the past two decades, media fans have moved from a position in the margins to centre stage in the transition from the analogue to the digital era of media consumption, as they are viewed by the culture industries as a model for how to engage as consumers of today's culture products. Fan scholars argue that the rapid spread of new media technologies as well as the shift in television programming and marketing has turned all viewers into active participants (Gray et al. 2007:4). It is questionable, though, whether media fan communities today still can be viewed as constituting subcultures with specific cultural codes, rules and reading practices. In the case of fans of television series, however, this may still be a valid claim, as fans' selection of the texts that receive praise and function as collective references is to some degree interconnected with their existing commitments, cultural interests and political orientation.

Ever since Jenkins' seminal work *Textual poachers* (1992), the study of fans has been considered an empowering enterprise carried out by scholar-fans. Jenkins relies heavily on Michel de Certeau's rather ambiguous concept of 'poaching' (1984), which accounts for various tactics of popular resistance, e.g., how the subordinate classes elude or escape institutional control. According to Certeau (1984:xxi), poaching on the property of others, transforming it "into a space borrowed for a moment by transient", is characteristic of the multiple practices of everyday life. In line with Certeau, Jenkins (1992:27) argues that fans lack direct access to the means of cultural production, yet they constitute a particularly active community whose activities direct attention to this process of cultural appropriation. Fans appropriate texts for their own ends, as their pleasure often derives from reading the chosen

work against the grain. Jenkins' reworking adds some level of complexity to Certeau's theorizing of 'the poacher'. However, it has its own shortcomings, in particular how Jenkins tends to conceive of media fans as a coalition of progressive, free-minded and rather homogeneous participants who produce subversive readings and texts.

The tactical fan-reworking seen in the examples Jenkins uses is often conceived of as progressive practices that are bound up with broader democratizing forces. Rhiannon Bury (2008a:77) asserts that all the extended examples that Jenkins gives in *Convergence Culture* (2006a) "present fan practices as positive or progressive." This propitious view on fan practices can be problematic, as the concept 'gamekeeping', exemplifies. Gamekeeping foregrounds a reactionary version of poaching (Bury 2008a:63) and is suggested by Matt Hills (2002) as an alternative to poaching, describing instead how networks increasingly view fans as loyal consumers to be created, where possible, or otherwise to be courted through scheduling practices. Hence, the supposedly resistive figure of the fan "has become increasingly enmeshed with market rationalizations and routines of scheduling and channel-branding" (Hills 2002:36-39), as fans are considered an important niche market. In this context, the concept is applied in relation to fans' practices of reading rather than consumption, as the term sheds light on fans' textual gamekeeping tactics – the tactics that are applied to display and secure brand loyalty by policing the boundaries of the type of fan readings that are viewed as 'appropriate' for online fans. To place reading in de Certeau's framework, 'the property' is the text and access to it is strictly monitored by its trustees – often educators and scholars. Findings from the present study reveal that fans performed the task of being the text's trustees by ensuring that the readings online fans carried out did not trammel the textual turf. In the study, the fans' gamekeeping tactics sought, in effect, to tame, contain, if not outright exclude readings, opinions and arguments in fan debates where Muslims are represented in a way that is not in accordance with a stereotypical view. This

view was arguably in line with the fact that Muslims continue to be one of the most maligned groups in the history of Hollywood (Shaheen 2008:XI), and more importantly, that *24* previously has made significant contributions to the portrayal of Muslims as negative stereotypes (see, e.g., Halse 2013).

Discursive spaces for online fan deliberation

For most media fans, meaning production is both a public and social process. Jenkins (1992:208) characterizes fans as consumers who also produce, readers who also write, and spectators who also participate. He attempts to extend ‘production’ to all fans – culminating in Fiske’s notion of ‘semiotic’ and ‘enunciative’ productivity (Fiske 1992:37-39). Here, reading a text and talking about it become instances of productivity (Hills 2002:30). Fans’ semiotic productivity thus comprises an important part of Jenkins’ notion of the textual poacher, and is especially emphasized in the present study.

Given that a large share of the oral culture of television has migrated to online media during the past decade (Bury 2008b:191), and moreover, that chat groups, message boards and blogs have become the venues where fans come to meet like-minded individuals and discuss the development of their favourite television shows, the discussion forum on the official *24-on-Fox* home page was clearly a potential source of a rich set of data on such practices. This forum is a multi-topic board accessed by a link from the *24* home page. Those who contribute here are predominately from the US, as the online discussions after each episode follow the US *Fox Network* broadcast schedule.⁸⁰ Postings from the official website were chosen because the site provides the most comprehensive discussion forum on *24* – offering opinions from experienced fans alongside those who have made their first point of entry into Internet media fandom.

⁸⁰ Identification of the ethnicity, age or race of participants who post on message boards that focus on television shows like *24* is difficult, as this information is seldom revealed in members’ profiles or in their postings.

On a global scale, there are doubtless a vast number of commercial and amateur sites that afford discursive space for *24* deliberation. At a great geographical distance from the institutional core of *24* Internet sites, there is a discursive space in Norway for deliberations on *24*, where fans post comments in Norwegian. Among the various discussion forums in Norway that address *24*, 'diskusjon.no' distinguishes itself as the main source of Norwegian data. Alongside 'VG Nett Debatt', it has the largest number of postings on *24*. As 'diskusjon.no' provided more discussion of the Muslim counter-stereotype, it became the preferred site from which to gather data.⁸¹ One similarity between 'diskusjon.no' and the official *24* forum is that both are moderated, and participants have to follow specific rules of discourse. Both are commercial websites. An important difference is that there are strong commercial interests attached to the official forum, since *Fox Entertainment Group* owns both the website and the serial. Furthermore, a disparity exists in terms of the number of participants who contribute postings; on 'diskusjon.no' only a few hundred fans were posting, while on the *Fox* forum there were thousands. Participants in both forums exhibited a strong interest in the show. Fans predominantly debated the latest episode, and their comments centred largely on the readings of *24*'s main characters. To a lesser extent, the focus was on the twists and turns of the narrative, and occasionally fans engaged in more open discussions of the serial in general or of certain recurring themes.

The communication and interaction between online fans around the world, as they share and deliberate the latest episode of *24*, carry traces of what is referred to as globalization and the concept of complex connectivity (Tomlinson 1999). Culture is an important dimension of globalization, and is, in Tomlinson's view (1999:22) "an intrinsic aspect of the whole process of complex connectivity." The consumption of popular culture texts such as *24* facilitates complex connectivity by the shared cultural references it provides to fan

⁸¹ 'Diskusjon.no' functions as a general discussion forum in Norway where a great many topics are up for debate.

communities located in different regions of the world. As *24* is designed for consumption on a global market, it is especially dependent on a global following, underlined by leading actor Kiefer Sutherland, who says he is “eternally grateful” for the loyal fan base worldwide, which has made the show possible (Masters 2010). How the serial choose to portray Muslims may thus be an important factor for the forming of fans’ opinions and attitudes toward Muslims on a global scale.

The data

Data were gathered from online fans’ discussions on *24*’s official website and ‘diskusjon.no’. An analysis of threads containing fan readings of the selected Muslims from online fans’ discussions on the two sites is presented. The advantage of gathering and analysing data from online chat rooms is that one can study naturally occurring communication without the interference that a researcher’s presence, control and intervention(s) may cause. From a media researcher’s standpoint, online sites in which television serials are discussed are a prospective data source, functioning as impromptu focus groups that can reveal the deeper cultural processes of fan communities. But such sites can also function as a marketing strategy for television shows that take advantage of interactivity to create fan communities and build viewer loyalty (Andrejevic 2008:24). As the present study critically examines online fans’ readings, it serves to broaden the perspective of traditional media fan studies, which typically focus on fans’ allegedly empowering reading practices.

The gathered online data comprise all posts on the two discussion forums that included one or a combination of the following names: ‘Hassan’, ‘Omar’, ‘Nadia’ and ‘Yassir’. The search engine on the official *24* forum was used to collect all posts in which one or several of the names were mentioned, as the vast amount of information available made only bounded sets of artificially extracted information possible. The information yielded from the

Norwegian forum, on the other hand, was not as voluminous. Therefore, it was manageable to accumulate the data by reading through all the fan posts related to *24* on the forum, and to sort out manually the postings that made a reference to the names mentioned above. The sample consisted of postings from when Season 6 was aired in the US on *Fox* in January 2007 to the airing of the serial finale in Norway on *TV2* in July 2010. In total, the data gathered from the US discussion forum consisted of 1499 posts and the Norwegian discussion forum of 127 posts, totalling approximately 350 pages of postings. The length of the posts that constituted the data ranged from just a few sentences (usually a short reply to a more elaborate posting) to over half a page (often the first posting in a thread).

Whilst space precludes a detailed presentation of how the material was analysed, the first step was to reduce the data through condensation and prioritizing. This is a method of making vast amount of qualitative data more concentrated by removing redundant material (Gentikow 2005:118). The second step was to categorize the data. This was carried out in line with Kathy Charmaz's (2003:258) proposal to code the emerging data by creating codes simultaneously with studying the data. The main point here is that the researcher's interpretation of the data should shape her emerging codes. Consequently, the online fan data were defined and coded into four main categories: complaint, praise given, progressive/reactionary and ironic/humorous.

Positive portrayals of Muslims: Yassir and Hassan

A good number of Muslim interest groups have accused *24* of promoting negative, stereotypical images of Muslims (CAIR Chicago 2005; BBC 2007). When Season 4 was broadcast, the serial's creators and producers met with harsh criticism concerning the representation of a terror cell as an ordinary Muslim American family (Halse 2013). They took measures to deal with the criticism by assuring Muslim interest groups that the portrayal

of Muslims would become more even-handed, and according to Scott Grogan, a Fox Network spokesman, this was reflected in the positive portrayals of Muslims in Season 6 (Reddy 2007). Co-executive producer David Fury claims they did a reasonably good job in Season 6, as they included characters who were not extremists and were fighting to stop the bloodshed. As Fury puts it: “It was a deliberate attempt to present it as even-handedly as we could” (Bennett 2008:13). In Season 8, Muslims are delineated along corresponding lines; the ‘stockpile’ Islamic terrorists are still present, but additionally a peace-oriented President of a fictitious Middle Eastern country and his family are part of the diegesis. Yet *24* has never received more intense criticism from online fans than for Seasons 6 and 8. Season 6 was, for instance, a target for fan complaints about new characters and perceived story repetitions (Bennett 2008:10).

A counter-stereotypical representation of Muslims should be the opposite of what Shaheen (2000) describes as Hollywood’s stereotypical image of them, which includes lurid and insidious depictions of Muslims as alien, violent strangers, as jihadists intent upon battling non-believers throughout the world. Arguably, *24*’s depiction of Nadia Yassir [Marisol Nichols] and Omar Hassan [Anil Kapoor] is largely this delineation in reverse. Both characters occupy a focal point in the overall narrative of the season as part of the main cast; they are prominently placed in *24*’s official PR-material (Islamic terrorists are given very limited exposure here); they are Muslims combating Muslim terrorists, and have steadfast beliefs in Western ideals and values. Moreover, both actors have made statements in the media about how they, when agreeing to do the parts, received assurances that there would be no typecasting of Muslims (see Lacob 2009; Jacobs 2007).

The descriptive, partly interpretative, synopsis that follows situates defining moments of the counter-stereotypes in *24*’s narrative.

Yassir was born in Pakistan, raised in the US, and features in all of the Season 6 episodes.⁸² She holds the position of Associative Specialist Agent in Charge at the Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU), and is portrayed as an attractive and career-oriented woman. In the first half of the season Yassir is represented as a helpmate assisting the progress of male action. A switch of mode in the representation occurs when she is tortured by a co-worker, as she is confronted with the accusation of being a mole inside the CTU because of her background. When an agent becomes violent during interrogation by abruptly strangling Yassir, her performance as a thoroughly professional CTU analyst breaks down. Another agent, Milo Pressman, who has previously exhibited an interest in her, intervenes and prevents the interrogation from proceeding. In the following episode, information is retrieved that documents Yassir's innocence. Afterwards, she is back to normal and continues to carry out her duties as if nothing had happened.

Yassir becomes notably more conjoined with the negative features commonly associated with bureaucrats in the interim of the sacking of the CTU Director. She accepts the position as acting Director, but in contrast to the former male Director, Yassir's performance is characterized by her inability to make her own decisions. Furthermore, she endures a profound narrative punishment in the scene in which Pressman is executed. The CTU staff are being held hostage by terrorists, who demand to be told who is in command. Here, Yassir gives an image of a damsel in distress, too terrified and weak to respond. Instead, Pressman claims to be the Director, resulting in him being shot in the forehead. However, Yassir's ability to suppress and not question her own shortcomings and wrongdoings during that day prevents her from being excluded at the workplace.

In Season 8, Hassan is the President of the fictitious Islamic Republic of Kamistan (IRK), and is on the verge of signing a peace agreement with the US. Hassan has no visual

⁸² The actress who plays Yassir, Marisol Nichols, is of Mexican/Latino origin. Her ethnic and racial background is thus inconsistent with her character.

signifiers identifying him with the traditional image of Muslims and Arabs commonly seen on US television (see Shaheen 1984:4-5). He has a trimmed beard, slick hair combed backwards, and wears a tailored dark-blue suit with narrow stripes – an outfit typical of Western elites. He is represented as an idealistic, peace-oriented Muslim leader with firm ethical principles, willing to suffer huge personal sacrifices for what he considers the greater good.

Hassan is romantically involved with an American female reporter. Their love becomes highlighted in an affectionate conversation with moments of silence between each sentence. The scene captures precious seconds before they have to say goodbye. In a moment of hesitation, after having stated the impossible nature of their relationship, Hassan grasps her arm when she is about to leave and stops her for a few seconds. The relationship he has developed with the reporter illustrates a secular and ‘Western’ understanding of love, not the stereotypical portrayal of the backward, male Muslim’s indulgence in sexual excess. ²⁴ portrays Hassan as an honourable but unwitting character who relies on personal feelings, underlined by what President Taylor’s adviser labels as Hassan’s two major attributes: ‘passion’ and ‘charisma’. Accordingly, it is these qualities that have made an improbable career as a political reformist in Kamistan oriented towards the West a success. However, the character is not depicted in line with attributes commonly associated with Western political elites, such as ‘calculating’ and ‘rational’. In the last episode in which Hassan is featured, the President has been taken hostage by Islamic terrorists, and is to be executed live over the Internet. The last scene featuring Hassan delineates him with a slit throat, with the back of his head against a Kamistan flag on the wall.

Based on this assessment of the counter-stereotypes, they cannot be regarded as successful attempts at representing Muslims ‘even-handedly’. The characters in question are deprived of empowering cultural codes and behavioural practices that make reference to their cultural background and milieu, and they come up short in comparison to their ‘white’ peers.

The ethnic construction of the counter-stereotypes

Our attention now turns to the fans by examining how two online fan communities made sense of the counter-stereotypes. In the presentation a distinction is made between the postings focusing explicitly on the ethnic construction of *24*'s counter-stereotypes and those focusing on other prevalent dimensions.⁸³

Because the serial has received a large amount of critical media attention for its portrayal of Middle Eastern Muslims, it is plausible to expect that the topic will be debated by fans. But the analysis of the fan readings suggests that instead of being engaged with the ethnicity to these characters, there was a lack of interest in this topic, particularly amongst the Norwegian fans. Still, it did preoccupy some fans on both discussion forums. In line with Jenkins' (1998) definition of fans as textual poachers who appropriate contents for their own end and question the series' core ideological premises, one US fan questioned *24*'s ideological underpinnings when portraying Muslims. In the excerpt below, as the fan accuses the producers of what might be termed 'ethnic fraud', she/he purports that fiction and reality should correspond when TV serials cast a member of an ethnic group:

'jbauer_1234' (19.1.2010): How ignorant are you and how ignorant do you think your audience is? (...).It's not even like you tried to sneak it past us - the entire Hassan family has DISTINCT Indian accents - and Omar Hassan was a star in SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE! How can you even say they represent the "Islamic Republic" when India's main religions are Hinduism and Buddhism?

This post, which addresses the producers of *24* directly, is a demonstration of fan power and agency, followed along the lines one might expect from a progressive and vocal fan community intent on influencing the entertainment industry's decisions. Many online fans who visit the official/major forums that discuss contemporary television programmes are

⁸³ The ethnicity of a group is defined as sharing some combination of common descent (real or supposed); cultural or physical characteristics; and sets of attitudes and behaviours (Smootha 1989).

convinced that their feedback has some sort of impact on writers and producers (Andrejevic 2008:26). This fan complained about the fact that *24* has Indian actors portraying Muslims and considered this “an irresponsible depiction of foreign cultures.” The casting of a non-member of an ethnic group is regarded here as an insult, presumably because it implies that the group is unworthy of self-representation. The fact that the actor Anil Kapoor features as Hassan is an additional explanation for the harsh fan-reaction. Kapoor has behind him an extensive career as a Bollywood icon, and the disparity between the star’s paratext and how he is deployed in *24*’s text is questionable.

The fan’s posting ignited a larger debate on the official forum concerning the show’s representation of ethnic and racial groups. A vast majority of the posts responding directly to the thread challenged it for being excessively politically correct (PC). ‘Nick’s post was illustrative of the kind of response given (19.1.2010): “You sound a lot more like an American who is concerned with stroking his own ego by APPEARING to be overly PC. You’re like the white guy visibly shaking his head at a comedy club while everyone else – white, black, whatever – is laughing their ass off at a joke that brings up race.” Nick goes on to assert: “*24* has never been a show that is overly concerned with political correctness.” In the other posts, fans joined the thread to take sides against what they perceived to be “PC bitching” on the forum, as one fan put it. ‘Eric’ (30.1.2010) chimed in: “the PC guy who started this thread has no basis for his argument. Who really cares anyway? It’s good enough for me. Where do you find a Kamistani actor anyway? It’s a fictional country.” Thus, whereas the arguments against ‘jbauer_1234’ varied, the PC-label was repeated in many fan postings, an act signalled to draw the front line between ‘us’ (true fans of *24*) and ‘them’ (the PC’s).

The merits of the original complaint about *24*’s representation aside, the intense debate it aroused gives an indication of how critique of the show was contained and disciplined by the US fans. A majority of the forum thus collectively defended a view on *24*’s casting of

Muslims that may be said to be reactionary, as it to some extent suggests that no one belonging to the ethnic group is capable of representing a principal character. This mobilization of defence of *24* against a fan's questioning of the show foregrounds a reactionary version of poaching, here identified and labelled as a 'textual gamekeeping intervention', i.e., an effort to challenge, discipline and contain fan posts that were critical of how *24* represents Muslim characters. Another illustrative example is 'Jack' (5.4.2010), who comments on the reactions of fans who expressed their disappointment when Hassan was killed:

As characters go his presence will be missed (...) but the truth is, Omar is a tragic character. Omar was essentially playing both sides of the issue, pleasantries with President Taylor, while subverting US foreign policy with an IRK spy operation in effect within the US... And when Farhad turned traitor, and things went south back home in Kamistan and the coup started to unseat Omar, well he got bit in the backside by his double dealing.... Add that to his stupid daughter that he didn't have any control of - sorry all you freespirits, but Kaila Hassan was supposed to be the president's daughter first, and Omar's angering more traditional IRK citizens by his dalliance with Meredith Reed.....All the while trying to remake his country and bring it out of the traditional arab/middle eastern mold..... which was going to make him as popular back home as tooth decay, and old Omar kind of did this to himself, and he should have known better....

First, this fan states that he, too, shares the fan community's sorrow over Hassan's passing, but then follows up with a characterization of Hassan that refutes any deeper concern. When he attempts to appear non-prejudiced, in the excerpt, he seems to be engaging in the cognitive strategy known as 'subtyping'. In subtyping, certain aspects of an outgroup member's characteristics or actions are cordoned off in order to preserve the overall stereotype of the outgroup. In the rest of the extract, several of 'Jack's statements are in alignment with homogeneous perceptions of the outgroup Muslims. He imputes negative

characteristics to Hassan and his family (“a tragic character”, “subverting”, “double dealing”, “his stupid daughter”), while linking Hassan’s country with the traditional “Arab mold.” Moreover, he added ingroup humour displaying Western stereotypical beliefs about the irrational, backward and primitive Muslim societies that do not know what is in their best interest (Karim 2003:29). The post was one of more than a handful of examples of textual gamekeeping interventions – here a deliberate effort to discipline and contain fan posts in which fans shared their emotional reactions over Hassan’s death.

The Norwegian online fans did not display any clear indication of textual gamekeeping interventions. However, a minority of the community did write postings that commented upon the ethnicity of the characters. In such cases, the fan readings would recurrently fall under the label textual poaching, as they took possession of the character for themselves, and redirected its meanings for themselves (Jenkins 1992) (this reading strategy was also deployed by US fans). For instance, the fan ‘Armageddon’ (21.1.2007) presumed Yassir to be a terrorist because of her Middle Eastern background. After the first episodes of Season 6 were broadcast, this fan was already quite sure that Yassir was a mole in CTU, as he/she “has noticed that she has spoken against some of what the others have said. Additionally, she has Muslim roots.” The observation offered no evidence of Yassir being a mole and can instead be interpreted as a bias in the fan’s attitude towards Muslims. More importantly, it pointed out her/his horizon of expectations based on previous experience with how *24* portrays Muslims (Jauss 1982).⁸⁴ Halfway through the season, evidence came forth suggesting that Yassir was working for the Muslim terrorists. ‘Armageddon’ (20.3.2007) congratulated him-/herself on being able to predict the course of events: “I was right!” In the next episode, however, the fan’s forecast proved to be wrong.

⁸⁴ In a reception study, Rolf Halse (2012) examines how ethnic Norwegians and Norwegian Muslims perceive *24*’s portrayal of Muslims. The study documents how *24*’s text mobilized stereotypes and facilitated stereotyping among focus group participants. An important contribution to the fear which the Muslim characters evoked in the ethnic Norwegians was related to the challenge and tension it created in the negotiation process of categorization.

Besides the readings provided here, it was surprising that only a small minority of the fan readings were making sense of the Muslim counter-stereotype in terms of its descent and culture. Instead, other categories seemed to be in the foreground and provide fans with explanations, such as gender (Yassir) and extratextual knowledge of the actor (Hassan). As the fans were largely inattentive to the counter-stereotypes' ethnicity and culture, the serial's efforts to increase these fans' awareness that the category 'Muslim' is comprised of more than stereotypically portrayed Jihadists proved futile.

Prevalent perceptions of the counter-stereotypes

In contrast to 'flat' stereotypes, complex characters in television drama are usually associated with a change in the person's character and/or modus operandi, and some US fans observed this quality in Hassan, e.g., the pseudonym 'atomicentity' (9.2.2010) liked "the character developments and details they put in" with regard to Hassan's morals having become very questionable. But US fans were not at all favourable in their assessment of Yassir. Paradoxically, she was interpreted in line with the type/stereotype. 's_arvidson' (26.5.2007) found unsatisfactory sides to her character: "flat, static, uninteresting, and mostly just served as 'eye candy'." The notion that she provided just 'eye candy' was particularly salient among fans' readings. While Hassan received mostly neutral readings, she became an object of fan apathy and scorn on the US discussion forum. Some readings were sexist, like 'ash10is' (20.9.2008): "She was seriously easy on the eyes but also seriously useless." This fan characterizes Yassir in quite opposite terms from what the makers of *24*'s expressed as their intention with the character. The fan addressed her looks as a positive attribute while writing her off as a person. Fans who registered this type of reading drew on a misogynist discourse and thus resisted and/or reworked elements of *24*'s text to seemingly fit their preconceptions (e.g., "in NO way did she ever look like she should be running the place"). A substandard

script and poor directing might arguably be seen to contribute to fans' outbursts. Indeed, the textual analysis delineates how the character fails in comparison to her 'white' peers – in conducting her duties and foreseeing events in the manner her white US counterparts do. Still, the fan readings suggest that for them the mere thought of a good-looking female with a Middle Eastern background becoming a leader of CTU was bizarre and offensive. The lack of other US fans participating online to negotiate or condemn these assessments made them seem like opinions the online fan community shared.

The fans contributing on the Norwegian discussion board scarcely gave any credit to, or complained about, *24*'s portrayal of Hassan and Yassir. The Norwegian postings did not display the usual love/hate attachments that fans develop with characters they are emotionally engaged with. In general it would seem that *24*'s counter-stereotype elicited indifference. The wishful thinking of 'DoktorBacon' (16.2.2010), who hopes that Hassan with his cheap haircut, "suffers a cruel death by the end of episode 10," is the closest one comes to an emotionally engaged reading. But this fan did not elaborate on why he had this wish, and the reading did not generate any response. The Norwegian fans commented on Yassir's good looks, but did not follow it up with negative characteristics like the US fans did. On average, the interpretations and comments registered on the Norwegian site showcased a lower degree of mastery of media literacy skills compared to the US fans, and this could be one reason for this community's lack of engagement and reflection upon meaning and representation when commenting upon the characters in question. Terms like 'character development' and 'stereotype' were not natural ingredients in Norwegian fans' vocabulary.

During deliberations on the counter-stereotypes in both discussion forums, some readings were marked by fans' application of a version of resistant interpretive practice, in which humour was an essential device. This was one of the predominant approaches used when fans read *24* against the grain. The US fan '24247' (27.3.2007), for example, mocked

24's depiction of Yassir and another CTU member kissing. In criticizing this scene, the fan applied humour when he/she asserted that the kissing scene evoked laughter. The Norwegian fan 'iMono' (27.3.2007) laughed as he/she associated the scene with 'Elling', a beloved fictional character in Norway who features in popular books and films as a mentally disabled person living on his own and lacking social activity: "Haha. Got the Elling-feeling from this episode (...) Milo and Nadia kissed today. That was sweet!:-)." The reading appropriated 24's efforts in creating a romantic moment into a ludicrous moment, which implied mental and social disablement on behalf of the text and those responsible for it.

The examples above illustrate that some of the fans applied humour that, in effect, generated emotional distance to 24's depictions of the counter-stereotype, an approach that is atypical for how fans usually engage with principal characters of their favourite show. Humour is usually not recommended for creating enlightened deliberation or nuanced argumentation, but it can be thought-provoking. Thus, perhaps these fans only intended to shed light on flaws in the show's depiction, as if this were the only reason why the counter-stereotype was unpopular among fans, not fans' biases.⁸⁵ Still, humour tends to gather those who already are in agreement, which in effect can be very confirming. Through interpretation of visual signifiers and the use of cultural codes, fans communicated biased perceptions indirectly (e.g., the Norwegian fan 'Nighkeeper' (29.1.2010): "What's the reason behind all the retro-gestures this season? (...) the president's haircut and his brother's suit!?!? Ludicrous"), soliciting a scornful view without any greater risk of being rejected by other participants.

⁸⁵ The textual analysis exposes the shortcomings of the two characters in question, indicating that fans will presumably have difficulties in identifying with them.

Conclusion

This article describes how *24*'s counter-stereotypical representation of Muslims were overridden by fans' preconceptions of Hollywood's traditional stereotype of Muslims and Arabs. There were few indications of an increase in online fans' awareness that the counter-stereotypical Muslim characters might in any way deviate from Hollywood's usual delineation of the 'cultural Other', as they largely educed non-favourable views or a shrug of shoulders. Very few fan evaluations and reactions were positively attuned. The expressed intention of *24*'s producers and writers to design and depict positive Muslim characters partaking in the show's main narratives, as a means to balance the serial's usual depiction of the 'stockpile' Muslim terrorist, proved to be a difference that did not make a difference amongst these fans.

Both online fan communities resisted the positive portrayal. Instead, fans' meaning-making repeatedly departed from the text's denotative meaning in ways that foregrounded a reactionary version of textual poaching. Two predominant fan reading practices that are associated with this notion were identified in the data. The first one, textual gamekeeping intervention, was found in readings that disciplined, challenged and contained the posts in which some fans signalled a critical view on *24*'s counter-stereotypes, e.g., in relation to the show's casting of Muslim characters. This reading practice was carried out exclusively by fans on the official discussion forum. The second one centred on commenting on the counter-stereotype in a derogatory and humorous way. This reading practice generated emotional distance to the Muslim characters and assented the community's bias. Furthermore, a rather surprising finding was the abundance of postings focusing on other dimensions than the ethnic construction of the counter-stereotypes. This indicates that many fans were either unable to discern the ethnic/cultural character of the counter-stereotypes as such, or did not find the issue relevant or interesting enough to bring up during discussion of the characters.

The findings suggest that these online television fans are of a different breed than the fans documented and described in the analogue era. One obvious difference is, that in the digital era, television fans are no longer an elite fraction of a coalition audience, but instead make up the entirety of a niche audience (Hills 2002). The notion of the textual poacher thus has shortcomings today in terms of the relevance of viewing television fans as a powerless elite. The implications of fandom's movement from cult status towards the cultural mainstream and from analogue to the digital era, are discussed by Jenkins (e.g., 1998, 2006a, 2006b, 2007). However, the potential problematic and disturbing aspects of this movement's impact on online fans' meaning-making practices are largely omitted in his work.⁸⁶

Cultural and social variations in the 24 online fan communities' reading practices were identified. The discussions among the fans on the official 24 site were to a greater extent refined and oriented towards inquiring deliberations than were those on the 'diskusjon.no' site. The US fans were engaged in a dialogue around questions of interpretation and displayed a higher degree of media literacy skills. They asserted cultural authority when they questioned producer's actions that challenged their own interest in the serial. The Norwegian fans' readings tended to be uncritical, consensus-oriented, and usually focused on topics related to fan gratifications – not on dialogue and debate on questions of interpretation, which is described as a central fan activity (Tulloch 1995 in Bignell 2008). The most notable distinction in the fan communities' interpretive practices was how the Norwegian fans seemed to deviate from Jenkins' typical conception of fans – as progressive experts in popular culture who pay close attention to the particularities of television texts.

⁸⁶ Jenkins asserts that online fans discussion lists “often bring together groups who functioned more or less autonomously offline and have radically different responses to the aired material” (Jenkins 2006b:142). Yet, he does not address the likely negative consequences this can have for online fan deliberation. Instead, Jenkins follows along the lines of how he conceived of fans in *Textual poachers* (1992), stating that fans “see unrealized potentials in popular culture (...) poachers want to appropriate their content, imagining a more democratic, responsive, and diverse style of popular culture (Jenkins 2006b:150).

The present findings underline the importance to research on television fan communities to address cultural and social differences around the globe, including variations within the West. Moreover, the study reveals that these online *24* fans belong to porous, heterogeneous communities that at times appropriate *24*'s text in reactionary ways, while at other times containing and disciplining fan readings that question *24*'s problematic approach to casting Muslim characters. This complicates drawing a picture of how television fans in general are in today's wired world, unless investigations and observations are narrowed to a very specific and limited fan community.

The study shows how the counter-stereotype, a seemingly positive representation, failed to be read as such. According to *24*'s producers and writers, the show's dual approach to the portrayal of Middle Eastern Muslims through its inclusion of both a few positive main characters and a dozen negative minor characters, was an 'even-handed' way of portraying the group. Based on these online fan readings, this seems instead to be understood as an extension of the serial's original portrayal of Muslims as essentially a major threat to the West. Consequently, these efforts to even out the representations of Muslims in the decade of 'the War on Terror' should be considered inadequate.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview questions for focus group (asked in the following order)

1. What do you associate with the television serial *24*?
2. Did you like or dislike the story about the family Araz?
3. What do you think about Jack Bauer?
4. How do you perceive the father?
5. How do you perceive the mother?
6. How do you perceive the son?
7. Why do you think the family act the way they do?
8. What do you think about the way *24* portrays this Muslim family?
9. What do you find most interesting about the Araz family?

Appendix B: Questionnaire form for focus group

Write your 'nickname' and your age here:

Please answer the following questions. Feel free to add additional comments or observations.

1. What is your favorite television series?
2. What kind of television series do you predominantly watch? (if there are several TV series genres, please write down in what order you would range them: 1, 2, 3)

Action

Drama

Crime

Comedy

Soap

Western

Science fiction

3. How many hours do you spend watching television series during a week?
4. How often do you discuss the television series you watch with friends during a week?
5. What do you associate with an action television series?

6. Have you previously watched *24*?

Yes (please put a mark here) No (please put a mark here and move to question 9)

7. To what extent have you been watching *24*? Please put a mark on the correct answer.

One episode

A few episodes now and then

In total at least half a season (12 episodes)

Have watched several seasons

Have watched all the seasons

8. What do you like about *24*? What do you dislike about *24*?

9. Do you know about other television series where Muslim characters are included?

10. Do you know a Muslim in person? Yes (put a mark here) No (put a mark here)⁸⁷

⁸⁷ This question was only addressed to the ethnic Norwegian participants.

