

# Textual Poaching, Gamekeeping and the Counter-stereotype

## *US and Norwegian Online Fans' Perceptions of Positive Portrayals of Muslims in '24'*

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### **Abstract**

In the analogue era, fan studies explored localized resistance within fan communities' cultural practices, examining how this might lead to new understandings of gender, sexuality, and race. However, there has been less work that examines the consequences fans' cultural practices using digital media have for the cultural politics of 'poaching'. The current article presents a study of online fans' perceptions of positively depicted Muslim characters from the Middle East in the television serial, *24*. Like the rest of the show's regular cast, these characters should be in focus for fans in their competing interpretations and evaluations of each episode in online discussion forums. The study comprises a comparison of how two online fan communities, one in the US and one in Norway, perceive counter-stereotypical Muslim characters. An analysis of fans' readings is carried out, and one central finding is that fans appropriated *24*'s counter-stereotype in ways that can be described as reactionary.

**Keywords:** online television fans, Muslim characters, *24*, textual poaching, counter-stereotypes

### **From the Periphery to the Mainstream**

Active fans of popular media proliferate in today's wired world. However, in the analogue era, 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* (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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

## 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 sub-cultures 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 *Conver-*

gence 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: 37-9). 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

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.<sup>3</sup> 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 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.<sup>4</sup> She holds the position of Associative Specialist Agent in Charge at 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 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 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 ignorant 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 the IRK 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 an IRK 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.

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.<sup>5</sup> 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 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., a 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.

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 ‘atomicity’ (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.<sup>7</sup> 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.

## 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 game-keeping 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.

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.

## Notes

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 'Diskusjon.no' functions as a general discussion forum in Norway where a great many topics are up for debate. The second-largest in Norway, the message board is affiliated with *Edda Digital*.
4. The actress who plays Yassir, Marisol Nichols, is of Mexican/Latino origin. Her ethnic and racial background is thus inconsistent with her character.
5. 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).

6. 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.
7. The textual analysis exposes the shortcomings of the two characters in question, indicating that fans will presumably have difficulties in identifying with them.
8. 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).

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