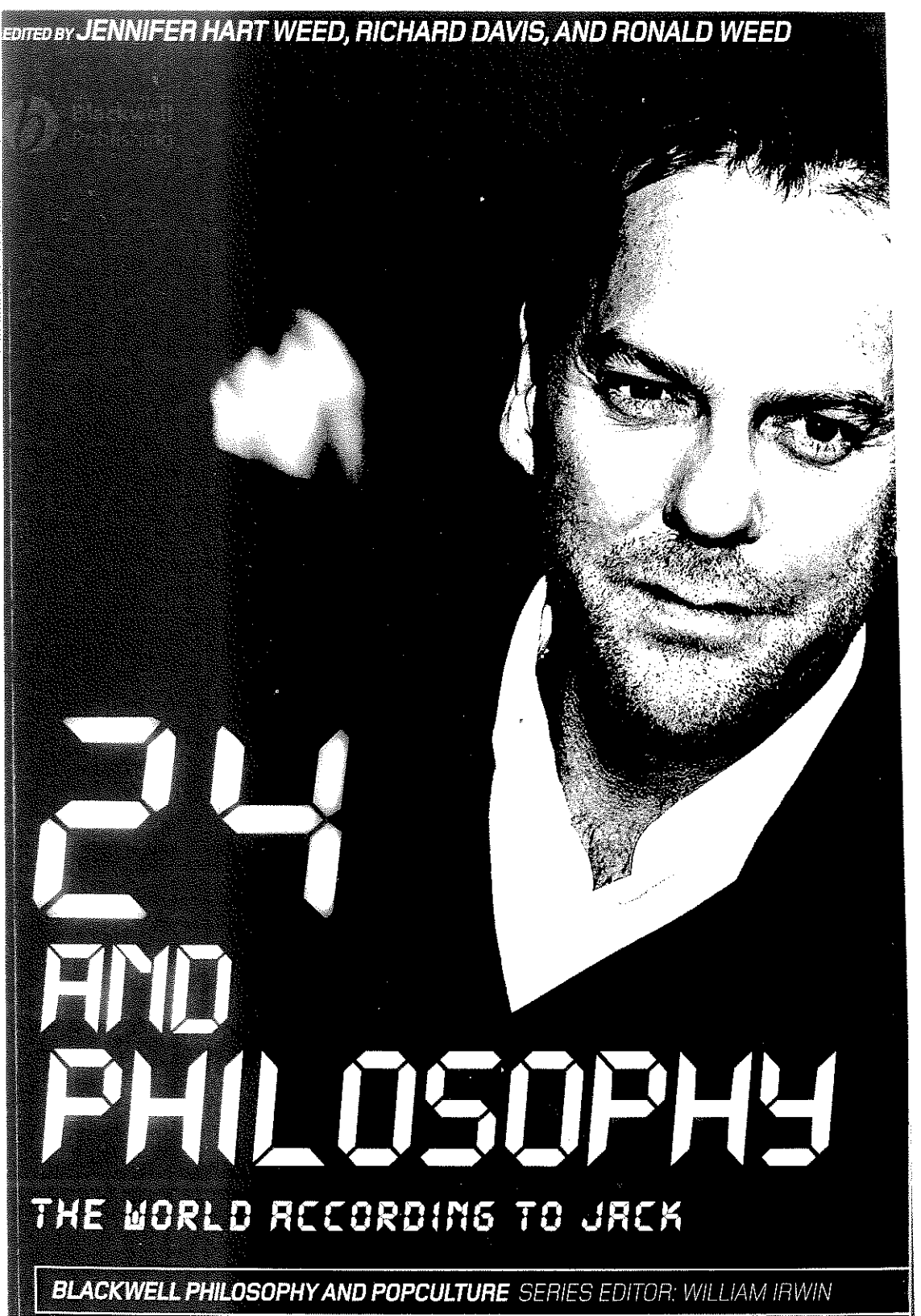

How the Cell Phone Changed the World and Made *24*

Read Mercer Schuchardt

> For the "message" of any medium or technology is the change of scale, or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.
> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*

The television program known as *24* is a documentary of the cell phone's complete takeover of contemporary life. All else is commentary.

Despite satellite uplinks, computer databases, a plethora of interconnected digital technology, and the usual primetime prescription of guns, cars, babes, and bad guys, the story loses all plausibility, most of its narrative structure, and more than half of its screen time if you remove the cell phone. This does not mean that *24* is about the cell phone; it merely means that the medium of the cell phone is the hidden ground upon which the figure of the show appears. Everything about *24* derives from this primary fact of media change: the content, the compression of time, the picture-in-picture display, the character types, the character hierarchy, the location of the dramatic action, the genre of performances, the network upon which the show plays, the time slot at which it originally aired, the actors' increasing but understandable inability to separate reality from fiction, the audience's imitation of the actors, and the audience's limited leisure time within which to understand the world through television.

When you introduce a cell phone to a culture, you don't get the old culture plus a cell phone. You get a completely restructured culture, one whose relationships, time commitments, interests, beliefs, fears,

hopes, and primetime television shows are themselves radically reoriented towards the communication made possible by the cell phone itself. Like many of technology's Faustian bargains, the cell phone's greatest blessing is simultaneously its greatest curse: you're always reachable. Hidden behind this assumption is the lurking imperative: you should always be available. Moreover, this applies to anyone—wife, lover, friend, boss, colleague, terrorist, president. To enhance our opening claim: *24* is the documentary of what your life would look like if all your cell phone calls were as important and special as you'd like everyone to think they are. Our guide through the show will be Marshall McLuhan and the media ecology school of thought that he created.[1] If you are just tuning into the work of Mr. McLuhan, then Season One of *24* is both an excellent primer for exegesis of the show and for an introduction to the media ecology perspective.

Manhattan's twin towers fell on September 11, 2001. Within six weeks of that event, on October 26, 2001, the USA PATRIOT Act was passed with no debate. Two weeks later, on November 6, 2001,[2] Episode 1 of Season One of *24* aired for the first time on Fox TV.[3] The opening shot of the season is the twin towers of Kuala Lumpur,

1 The Media Ecology Program at New York University's Department of Culture and Communication was founded by Neil Postman in 1971 and survived until his death in 2003. It was known as the New York School of media ecology; it owes its existence to what is now known as the Toronto School of media ecology, whose work is presently carried on by the Canadian scholars whose work or studies were influenced by McLuhan's Centre for Culture and Technology, which existed from its founding in 1963 to McLuhan's death in 1980. Both "schools" have active members in the Media Ecology Association, founded in 1998 by Lance Strate (chair of the Fordham University Communication and Media Studies program, and a former student of Neil Postman's), with a website at www.media-ecology.org.

2 In 1998, November 6 was also the release date of significance for the movie *The Siege*, whose poster's headline declared, "On November 6, Our Freedom Is History." The film deals with the loss of civil liberties after martial law is declared in response to Muslim terrorist bombings in New York City. Civil libertarians and conspiracy theorists kicked up a stink about the film prior to 9/11, and afterwards many saw it as the *Wag The Dog* film that scripted many of the 9/11 events and subsequent political fallout.

3 Fox TV is Rupert Murdoch's station, long known to be the furthest to the right on the ideological spectrum among the major networks. This mirroring of the show's "realness" in a political climate that matches it, is one of the great uncommented reasons for the show's popularity. Just as a caption reflects and confirms the reality of the photograph above it, so does *24* act as the caption for the images we see on the nightly news. Neither one may, in fact, be real, but by virtue of their mutual confirmation of each other, even far-left liberals, moderates, and independents are ga-ga over the show.

the world's then-tallest buildings. The first character we meet, Victor Rovner, introduces us to the three technologies that drive the storyline of the show. In order of appearance, they are the cell phone, the Internet-connected computer, and the geosynchronous satellite. Of these, the cell phone is the visible manifestation on earth of what has been true in the heavens since the late 1960s. McLuhan pointed out that the satellite makes a proscenium arch over the planet and, no offense to Shakespeare, turns the whole world into a literal stage. By extension, this makes every human an actor on that stage, with the implication that someone is always watching. This total surveillance society is only possible by virtue of the cell phone-to-satellite matrix, which makes everyone with a switched-on cell phone traceable to within 3 meters of his or her actual, realtime location.

To Heraclitus' ancient dictum that "war is the father of all things," McLuhan added, "War is never anything less than accelerated technological change."[4] *24* emphasizes the implicit corollary: technological progress is the history of conquerors. Like the Internet—the information superhighway leased to the citizenry during times of peace—the cell phone is also a technological outgrowth of the modern battlefield's need for wireless communication. Thus, most late twentieth-century communications gadgets are properly understood as stealth military technologies that have been declassified due to overexposure in the modern urban warfare zone. In practice, this has also meant that the time lag between military and civilian use of a technology has gotten shorter and shorter. And this decreased lag is precisely the drama borne out in Season One of *24*. In every episode we witness the tension between Jack Bauer's civilian life and his military life, and then see it magnified when his wife, in her search for their daughter, calls in to Nina for "favors"—almost always in the form of an extralegal use of military technology to track and trace her daughter's kidnappers. Because Jack is such a loving father, he has to continually circumvent CTU protocol in order to save his family; because his wife is an equally aggressive defender of the sanctity of the home, she too will break convention to acquire the tools and techniques necessary to serve justice. The message to the viewer is clear: you must fight to the death if you want to keep your family

4 *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 101.

together. As such, the show embodies two of McLuhan's most prophetic insights: (1) "World War Three—A TV guerilla war with no division between civil and military fronts,"[5] and (2) "Under conditions of rapid change, the family unit is subject to special strain."[6]

After Kuala Lumpur, the first character in America we meet is CTU's own Richard Walsh, when he says "Excuse me a moment" in order to take a cell phone call. We learn that Senator Palmer's life is in danger. In the next scene, we meet the Bauer family and within two minutes Jack receives a phone call from his colleague Nina requiring him to get to CTU immediately.

And that's the set-up. For the next 24 hours, a series of cell phone calls between these four elements—(1) CTU, (2) Palmer's campaign, (3) the Bauers, and (4) the escalating layers of "bad guys"—will heighten our tension, increase our heart rates, and sell us the fear so necessary to maintaining our interest in the show and the terror-ridden world it wants us to believe we live in. Almost every scene will use the cell phone as the narrative device deployed to rapidly yank us into the next scene, and visually premature jump cuts will make sense only by accompanying voiceovers of a phone call between two discrete locations. We constantly see characters in search of each other as simultaneously being so close, yet so far away. For each scene with a cell phone in it, there is a subsequent scene with a missed call, a misunderstood word, a dying battery, a bad reception, a call waiting, a please-leave-a-message-after-the-beep, a plaintive, "Why didn't you call?"

The Splintered Life

Touted by its makers as being "ripped from today's headlines" (a phrase also associated with *Law and Order*), 24 will progress to the point where it comes to mirror the paranoid emotional state so familiar to any habitual news-watcher, and progress from there to actually

5 *Take Today: The Executive As Drop-Out* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p. 152.

6 *The Mechanical Bride* (New York: Vanguard, 1951), p. 156. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *Mechanical Bride*.

become a proxy or substitute for the news itself. Oddly, this will be accompanied by a sense of relief and gratitude, because the show is about as accurate at monitoring the prescribed state of fear as the daily color-coded terror alerts were, which is to say they represent a sort of national mood ring, and should long ago have moved to the weather segment of the news. In our increasingly busy, multi-tasking lives, where both mom and dad have to work in order to make the mortgage, the rising cost of gas, and cover the decreasing value of the dollar, 24 will become the placebo antidote for the fact that we never spend meaningful time together anymore, except, perhaps, on the cell phone. The show will mirror our personal reality while confirming our growing fear of a fantastic but seemingly real external threat, and thereby win the domestic war on terror before a single shot is fired—simply by coercing us into an entertained acceptance of the world the news media presents to us. As a bonus, the show will offer us the illusion of a lone white male hero who defends all that we most dearly wish to be possible—a sane, intact, and meaningful family life in a sane, intact, and meaningful society. If he dies, we die, and in our allegiance to Jack Bauer we pledge our allegiance to the State that produced him, the National Emergency Entertainment State[7] from which there is no escape, no chance of opting out, and nothing to do but sit tight and hope you survive the repetition and escalation of the

7 By "National Emergency Entertainment State" I am not hyperbolizing, but referring to the increasing confluence of (1) *entertainment as distraction from the realities of our political economy* and (2) *fear of the unknown as coercive guarantor of participation* as being the two dominant factors in American life. Independently, they are cause for concern, but when combined, they make for odd bedfellows indeed. My favorite example of this came in the summer of 2004 when Coca-Cola produced the "You Can Win, But You Can't Hide!" campaign, in which a GPS navigation device and an RFID chip were installed in special cans of Coke sold in 12-packs. The idea was that you could drink Coke all summer, but if you won the lucky can, *you couldn't get away no matter where you were* from the corporation that would show up "Wherever you are!" to reward you with a 3,600 pound Chevy Equinox SUV delivered by helicopter—a quasi-military operation in and of itself. Whether intentional or not, the campaign combined the pleasure of summer fun with the horror of a total surveillance society in such a bizarre combination that it made the Constitutionally guaranteed freedom to "the pursuit of happiness" seem like it had become a mandatory law that was now intermittently demanded of citizens in order to sustain capitalist democracy itself. If the Coke campaign was the second of such imperial decrees, the first came when President Bush urged Americans, three days after 9/11, to go to Disney World.

formula from Season One to Season Seven, to whenever the next "War On Abstractions"[8] is declared.

It is not surprising that it makes for deadly serious entertainment. The first season had exactly zero jokes, laughs, or comic relief moments. It was as dreary as going through airport security, the one semantic environment where joke-telling is literally against the law. And as tragedy, it is constant: the constant tragedy of raising kids! The constant tragedy of the war on terror! The constant tragedy of American race relations! The constant tragedy of American politics! Of trying to win Orange County! Of petty criminals! Of Kosovar blowback! Of trying to save your marriage! Of overlapping storylines! Of being two people at once! Of being three! As the screen splits, so too does Bauer's personality—father, husband, agent, lover, friend, employee, criminal, hero, savior! At one point, Bauer asks for cameras to cover every square inch of the adjacent hotel room, giving him two angles of every area. This is the multi-tasking porn that makes up large portions of the show itself, and that we are required to see Jack in light of: yes, he's the CTU top agent protecting the president, but right now he's got to kill the president in order to save him. We understand the necessity of schizophrenia, quadrophenia, or whatever it takes to get you through the night. And we only understand this because we have the necessary accessory to the splintered life, the cell phone.

The phone that keeps us together. Keeps our illusions tabulated. Keeps our data, our dates, our birthdays, our important memos, our urgent must-do lists. Keeps us amused with games in between all that seriousness.

8 In living American historical memory, these abstractions are The War on Hunger, The War on Poverty, The War on Drugs, The War on Illiteracy and The War on Terrorism. In all cases they are endless wars because the enemy is an undefeatable abstraction. Not to be crass, but the poor, hungry, drugged, illiterate, and violent will always be with us. Literacy, the one really achievable goal of a culture for the majority of its citizens, is perhaps the one goal most actively being avoided in America today. Unlike poverty or hunger (somewhat overlapping issues), literacy is at least a "solve it once, solve it for a lifetime" type of problem, whereas hunger could strike anyone up to three times a day.

Gender Blender

It is precisely its ability to capture the splintered life so well that allows *24* to offer something entirely new in the history of television: a genre and gender blender of media consumption. McLuhan said, "Horse opera like the sports page, is a man's world, free from the problems of domesticity. Soap opera is a woman's world, laden with personal problems" (*Mechanical Bride*, 157). *24* is a brilliantly original combination of these two. It is the sexual tension of Scully and Mulder, but this time with children, marital difficulties, curfews, and counselors thrown in. It is daytime television plus primetime television. It is TV for him and her, in one program, implicitly acknowledging that both men and women have no time anymore, since each is required to be at work 24/7/365. No time to relax, no time to watch TV, no time to work on relationships, in fact no time for anything except possibly a one-hour show that can take care of all of it. *24* is that one show that husbands and wives can watch together, tolerate each other through the end of, and thereby confirm both their relationship commitment as well as its problems, its malleability, and its hope of a solution. It is the serial suspense of the cliffhanger meeting the morbid magnetism and endless escalation of the soap opera drama. *24* is a cliff opera at best, a soap hanger at worst. While it is arguable that the show's femininity is of a rather masculine nature, that is merely indicative of the times we live in, itself largely a subset of the technology and media available to us.[9] But for McLuhan, writing in 1951, the picture was quite different, and in the time between then and now we see how far we've come in media consciousness. He uses the term "horse opera" instead of "cliff hanger," but with that one substitution we see quite clearly what *24* hath wrought:

> Horse opera and soap opera, then, embody two of the most important American traditions, the frontier and the home town. But the two traditions are split rather than fused. They show that radical separation between business and society, between action and feeling, office and home, between men and women, which is so characteristic of industrial man. These divisions cannot be mended until their fullest extent is perceived. (*Mechanical Bride*, 157)

9 On this topic, see my forthcoming book, *The Disappearance of Women: Technology, Pornography, and the Obsolescence of Gender* (Dallas: Spence, 2008).

And there it is: the cell phone is the primary technological mechanism by which "these divisions" have been mended, because the cell phone is the communication technology that forces us to perceive, beyond any reasonable doubt, that the border between business and society, between office and home, between men and women, has indeed entirely collapsed in on itself. And the cell phone is both a pusher and enforcer of this new perception. It's a distracting form of entertainment as well as a serious social obligation. Thanks to the cell phone, we are now always at work, even while at home. Every day we come home exhausted, we both identify with Jack Bauer—"Today is the longest day of my life"—and we feel comforted by his existence because, unlike Jack, we will at least get some sleep. Thanks to the cell phone, we are now always talking to our spouse, even while at work, while commuting, while at the gym, while coming home—"Should I pick up anything?" We are now always socializing while working, and working while socializing. For a man to have two cell phones—one for the wife, one for the mistress—is no longer a sign of being Italian. Even today's increased emphasis on sexual contact was predicted by McLuhan as the price for living in the modern city, to compensate for the incredible loneliness and anxiety that the city produces.

Events Occur In Real Time

While the show is the first to "occur in real time," the reality behind the scenes is quite different:

- Two episodes are filmed simultaneously over a period of 15 days.
- Completing an entire season, including pre- and post-production work, takes ten and a half months.
- Roughly 25 hours of footage are edited into one episode of the show.[10]

Like the law of animation, the production of this seemingly "real-time" show comes at a very high cost. Think of it as primetime maple syrup: just as you need 40 gallons of sap to make 1 gallon of liquid

10 See www.imdb.com/title/tt0285331/trivia.

gold, so too does one full 24-hour day require nearly a year of intense coordinated effort. The resulting concentration of production effort into a golden hour of programming actually results in a show that is, in fact, only 42 minutes long. The commercial breaks take 3 minutes each. And yet the effect on the viewer is equally exhausting—watching these 42 minutes feels like a full day's work. When the commercial break does come, we see the minute counter while hearing the offscreen audio tickdown, echoing the human heartbeat pumping at full volume. The rhythmia comes back when the show resumes. The only time the audience can breathe is during the commercials. This implies a subtle corollary within the action of the show itself—during commercial breaks, no crisis gets to its breaking point—the characters themselves can take these few minutes, sponsored by corporate America, to relax and regroup. This one-third of each real-world hour is, in external and objective fact, how much time the average American is not plugged in during his or her waking life. Nearly 12 hours of a 16-hour day are spent engaged in some form of mass media, according to the 2004 Ball State study.[11] Even ten years earlier, Leslie Savan estimated that the average city dweller ingests some 16,000 commercial icons, images, ads, jingles, or logos every day.[12] On *24*, the product placement within the show is massive and clearly proportional to the regular advertising budget, both of which are apparently necessary to equal the show's production budget—within the first half of Episode 1 of Season One, we are made conscious by name and logo of Adidas, Coldplay, Greenday, 2Pac, Apple Ibook, Molson Canadian Beer, GMC Yukon XL SUV, Walgreens, AT&T, and Ericsson. The real purpose of the commercial break, as everyone knows by now, is to pick up your cell phone to find out if your friends are watching the same show. You have to get your "Oh my God, I can't believe they killed her!" into your friend's ear before the show resumes.[13]

11 The study was done in 2003, the report issued in 2004. See the press release from the Middletown Media Studies Report from the Center for Media Design at Ball State University, online at www.bsu.edu/icommunication/news/stories/february/2_25_03.html.

12 Leslie Savan, *The Sponsored Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

13 Some of the dramatic implications of *24*'s "realtime" format are discussed in Paul A. Cantor's chapter.

Today is the Longest Day of My Life

Part of the exhaustion of the show for the viewer is the simultaneity of the events, requiring us to pay attention at all times to all subplots.[14] Jack Bauer is never somewhere, he is always everywhere thanks to being Jacked-in to what Adam Greenfield calls everyware:[15] ubiquitous communication technology that won't allow us the twentieth-century luxury of separating the personal from the professional. What starts out as a split-screen ends up as a four-screen image by the end of the show, and by Episode 2 we are up to five screens. As Jack walks in, he opens this metaphor for the viewer, while conversing on the cell phone with Teri about their marital stress: "I was thinking we should try to remember what it was like when we were kids, you know." She responds, "It's a different world now, Jack." Jack responds, "Yeah, I know." The show is both a celebration and lament of this "different world now" from the parents' point of view. To the younger generation, when not out raving or being killed by the "different world," it is not so shiny. When Jack and Teri have to hack in to their daughter's computer to find out where she is, the first obstacle is her password. Jack says, "We gave her her own password to show that we trusted her, remember?" After hacking in, Jack discovers that his daughter's password is "lifesucks."

This "Everywhere" phenomenon is partly responsible for the peculiar blurring of the lines between fact and fiction; it's as though they no longer inhabit two distinct realms. Indeed, *24* has created some rather unusual conflations of reality and entertainment. Some highlights, which you may recall from the last few years:

14 This exhaustion may be evidence of my personal struggle here, and not the common experience: I have never owned a television nor lived in a house with one. Steven Johnson, in *Everything Bad Is Good For You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* (New York: Riverhead, 2005) argues that plot complexity and rapidity (in shows like *24*) actually educate us to watching smarter, closer, and with more attention to subtle detail. If this essay is any indication, Johnson is either dead on, or else dropped out of Columbia graduate school just before he got to the good stuff.

15 See Greenfield's book, *Everyware: The Dawning Age of Ubiquitous Computing* (Berkeley: New Riders, 2006).

- Officials at the Council on American-Islamic Relations met with producers back in 2005 when the *24* plot revolved around Muslim fundamentalists, and they were upset again because Season Six seems to portray members of their religion in the same shady light. Council spokesman Rabiah Ahmed says, "The overwhelming impression you get is fear and hatred for Muslims. After watching the premiere, I was afraid to go to the grocery store because I wasn't sure the person next to me would be able to differentiate between fiction and reality."
- *The New Yorker* magazine reported that Brigadier General Patrick Finnegan, Dean of the US Military Academy at West Point and an eminent military lawyer, had flown to California to meet producers of *24*. Finnegan reportedly told the producers that promoting illegal behavior on the show was having a damaging effect on US troops in Iraq. Finnegan told the magazine, "The kids see it and say, 'If torture is wrong, what about *24*?'" In response, Gordon (one of the show's producers) told the *Inquirer*, "The thesis that we are affecting our soldiers in Iraq in their treatment of prisoners is being exaggerated, I think. Hopefully, there are a lot of filters between their watching *24* and their work in the field."
- Dennis Haysbert was furious when he found out that his character on *24*, President David Palmer, was being assassinated and told producers he would refuse to tape the scene. The star argued over the storyline for months because he felt killing the president would send out a dangerous message to viewers. Haysbert appeared on the chat show *The View* where he explained how he left the show saying, "They did it as a stunt to get ratings and it worked. It started at the end of Season Four when I did the last six episodes. Then I thought I was done. I was right in the middle of the fourth episode I was doing when they called me up at lunch time to talk to me and said, 'Dennis, on the first show of next season, we're going to shoot you.' I said, 'Good luck with that. What's it going to be: a CNN (news) report? Because I won't shoot it.' So we went back and forth and back and forth and the season ended and all during the summer the fellows kept calling and then they sent their mercenary, one of my best friends on the show, the show runner Howard Gordon, whom I love, and I have to tell you before I go any further that I love the guys on *24*, both in front of the camera and behind it. We have a legacy of killing

> our leaders in this country and I said, 'Guys, don't do it.' Howard basically said, 'Dennis, look I understand how you feel. I believe you, I believe in what you're saying, but we need it to start the show, because without it, we don't have a season.'"[16]

That the actors and the audience are increasingly unable to separate reality from fantasy is no small matter. In another context Michael Crichton has said, "The greatest challenge facing mankind is the challenge of distinguishing reality from fantasy, truth from propaganda"[17]—which makes you wonder if he too is a fan of *24*. Is that too paranoid? Well, McLuhan predicted that as well—in his tetrad analysis of the satellite he pointed out that, in retrieving ecology, the satellite simultaneously returns us to primitive man's state, and that "the primitive regards everything as related to everything—a condition we recognize as paranoia."[18] And this paranoia, of course, happens without our conscious awareness: "The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception without any resistance."[19] If you've never thought of *24* as a documentary of the cell phone's effect on your life until now, well that's why.

Gotta Go

Listen, I can't talk much longer. If you need more, consult the full works of Marshall McLuhan. Meanwhile, maybe turn your cell phone off and try to get some rest—tomorrow's going to be the longest day of your life.

16 All quotes taken from www.imdb.com/title/tt0285331/news.

17 Crichton said this in a speech to the Commonwealth Club, September 15, 2003, available at www.michaelcrichton.com/speeches/speeches_quote05.html.

18 *Laws of Media* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), p. 150.

19 *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 33.

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