

## Something's Happened: Fictional Media as a Coping Mechanism<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** *By the afternoon of September 11, entertainment executives were rushing to remove media products containing 'inappropriate' references from American television and movie screens. While references to terrorism were the starting point, their caution extended to themes of war and threats against America, all in the name of 'public sensitivity' and 'respect for the victims'. Simultaneously, uninterrupted news coverage was brimming with scenes of devastation and heartbreak. What makes fiction inappropriate when the equivalent fact is not? Can fiction help the viewer process fact, and if so, should it?*

**Keywords:** interpretive frames, media interpretation, mass communication.

### Introduction

On Tuesday September 11, 2001, there may have been over 50 television channels across the United States of America, but there was only one thing being broadcast. For four days, the major American broadcast television networks devoted the entirety of primetime to commercial free coverage of the attacks on New York and Washington. Over the weekend of September 15–16, each returned to some semblance of normal programming, but with comprehensive scheduling changes. Film studios were also reconsidering marketing and distribution strategies, some because of an inability to secure television advertising and others in acceptance that the nation was transfixed by the small screen.

However a great many of these decisions to postpone, cancel, or remove media products from American screens were couched as having their basis in sensitivity and respect for the victims. As frantic as those first days were, the scope of projects affected on this basis was remarkable. With unbelievable scenes of destruction and heartbreak on almost every channel, why was it considered inappropriate to offer the audience fictional stories about war, terrorism, and political intrigue? Why were audiences considered ill-equipped to watch fictional good guys win battles against aliens,<sup>2</sup> but able to watch hour after hour of an increasingly hopeless search for real heroes? Why did the Twin Towers need to be immediately erased from our screens<sup>3</sup> when their rubble was still strewn over New York's streets?

### Interpretative Frames

The traditional mass media response to tragedies such as the Oklahoma City bombing or war has been to focus on news gathering, with fictional treatments following months, if not years later. These fictional treatments have focused principally on viewer empathy and identification with the people involved, on the heroes and their lives. Stories focused on issues and motivations, on moral judgments of policy issues, seem to need the distance that only time can give, emerging years later if at all. But is there another role that fictional media can play?

Research shows that viewers of media products, both fictional and factual, use interpretive schemata or strategies to understand those products. These interpretive strategies are largely unconscious and draw on a multitude of sources. Many of these sources are also used by media creators to signpost their intended meaning to increase the likelihood of it being interpreted as the creator intended. Genre is one important factor—as familiarity with a genre or even a particular media product increases, viewers become familiar with its rules and conventions and are able to use them to construct meaning. Other media representations and treatments are also influential in forming these strategies, cross-pollinating understanding of both media products and broader issues.

This idea of cross-pollination is at the heart of fictional media's potential role as a coping mechanism. There is a school of thought that sees mass media as a way in which individuals meet social and psychological needs such as gathering information, reducing personal insecurity and finding support for their values. In times of social instability when established institutions and beliefs are challenged, people no longer have the social realities that usually provide frameworks for understanding, acting or escaping. This makes them more likely to turn to the media to provide these frameworks.

Certainly the public's needs, particularly for information, were at the center of the networks' decisions to devote so much airtime to continuous, commercial-free news coverage despite the financial and human cost.<sup>4</sup> As MSNBC's President and General Manager Erik Sorensen said, 'This is what we do, and we can't let people down'.<sup>5</sup> But can the rules and conventions of fictional media give it the scope to go deeper than information to inform, reassure and influence at a deeper, emotional level than factual media is able?

### Fiction in Times of Crisis: *Isaac and Ishmael*

With the entertainment industry continuing to remove 'inappropriate' media products, ten days after the tragedies in New York, Washington and Philadelphia NBC announced that it had approved a script for its drama series *The West Wing* that would deal directly with 'some of the questions and issues facing the world in the wake of the recent terrorist attacks in the United States'.<sup>6</sup> Series author Aaron Sorkin and his co-executive producers John Wells and Thomas Schlamme not only felt it was important to take a moment to acknowledge the tragedy but also that they had something to contribute to the national discourse on how to move forward. As John Wells said, 'Hopefully it will make people talk and think. You can't pretend it didn't happen'.<sup>7</sup>

The challenge for Sorkin as author was to find a premise that allowed him to address these questions and issues without crossing into opportunism. Sorkin's simple premise gave him the distance he needed by taking the focus off the terrorists and the tragedy: as part of the Presidential Classroom program, a select group of high school students are being addressed by Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman when the White House has to be sealed. Unbeknownst to the students and Josh, a routine FBI database search has triggered an investigation in which the FBI, Secret Service and White House Chief of Staff Leo McGarry are faced with a terrifying possibility: a terrorist agent successfully infiltrating the headquarters and home of the President of the United States.

It is a *West Wing* convention that the scenes before each episode's main titles serve as a prologue to the self-contained episode that follows. The prologue for this episode, *Isaac and Ishmael*, closes with a seemingly simple but thematic statement by Josh to the increasingly frightened group: 'Something's happened'. On September 11, something did happen; something that wasn't supposed to be able to happen and as heartbreaking as the casualty lists in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania were, in many ways they were not the most terrifying part of the attacks for most Americans. The real terror was that there was something in the world that could conceive of such evil and it had their country in its sights.

### **Answering Questions and Issues**

By placing Josh and the group from Presidential Classroom in the middle of a crash situation, Sorkin created both an analogy for what was happening across America and a way to address the questions and issues to which NBC referred. Faced with an audience with only one thing on their mind, Josh leads a socratic discussion that ultimately reassures both fictional and literal audiences by empowering them with knowledge. Americans are not renowned for their knowledge of global events, and Sorkin drew on almost his entire cast to help the audience build an interpretive frame by using analogies: Islamic extremists and the Ku Klux Klan; the Taliban's actions in Afghanistan, and the Nazi's actions in Poland; the circumstances that create a terrorist and those that create a gang member.

With the parameters more clear, Sorkin turns to the fundamental issue for the students and indeed for many Americans: why are Islamic extremists trying to kill us? The students' responses mirror the rhetoric of world leaders and the news media in the days following the attacks, exhorting the values for which America stands. Unsatisfied, Josh observes:

I'll tell you: right or wrong—and I think they're wrong—it's probably a good idea to acknowledge that they do have specific complaints. I hear them every day. The people we support; troops in Saudi Arabia; sanctions against Iraq; support for Egypt. It's not just that they don't like Irving Berlin.

At the time, this was a speech not without risk. Suggestions in the days following the attacks that they had been the direct result of American foreign policy, sparked considerable outrage and a brief but bitter public debate that went largely unresolved. Traditional fictional responses might have patriotically avoided this issue, but *The West Wing's* executive producers wanted to advance the national discourse and that meant exploring both views to some extent. Josh's assistant

Donna voices the thoughts of a significant part of the viewing audience when she responds with:

D Yes it is.

J No, it's not.

D I don't know about Irving Berlin, but your ridiculous search for rational reasons why somebody straps a bomb to their chest is ridiculous.

Again, rather than giving a simplistic, populist reply, Josh explores her point and the difficult issue of how it is possible that simply being an American can make one the object of such hatred. To be condemned for being a citizen of a particular country is a concept Americans may intellectually understand but very few would have experienced, making the terrorist attacks even more incomprehensible. Through Josh, Sorkin tries to explain the unexplainable: his brief discussion of the beliefs of Islamic extremists contrasts them with basic tenets of the American way of life, including restrictions on women and acceptable cheers at soccer matches, and then asks:

So what bothers them about us? Well the variety of cheers alone coming from the cheap seats in Giant's Stadium when they're playing the Cowboys is enough for a jihad, to say nothing of street corners lined church next to synagogue next to mosque; newspapers that can print anything they want and women who can do anything they want including taking a rocket ship to outer space, vote and play soccer. This is a plural society: that means we accept more than one idea. It offends them. So yes, she does have a point . . .

On one level, this passage presents a fairly even-handed discussion of the issue. Both viewpoints are discussed without any overt statement as to which is correct, leaving the interpretation in the hands of both fictional and literal audiences. However, when the dynamics of the entire scene are considered rather than simply extracted dialogue, signposts towards the creator's preferred meanings are revealed. Beyond the fact that one viewpoint is shown making allowances to the other, suggesting dominance, particularly telling is which character presents which viewpoint.

Donna is female, and previous scenes have established that she is Josh's assistant. From the students' perspective, she has taken a subordinate even subservient position in relation to Josh, staying a step back and to the side to allow him to be the center of the figurative stage. She has remained largely silent, not participating with the students in their discussion and Josh's only 'public' comment to her at this point has been a terse command to which she immediately responded. Regular viewers more attuned to the dynamics of this relationship would have even stronger frames of reference for this relationship and for decoding Sorkin's intended message.

A similar examination reveals Sorkin's support for one side of the civil liberties versus intelligence powers debate between Communication Director Toby Ziegler and Press Secretary CJ Craig. This issue, very topical in the mainstream media as people grappled with how the attacks could have happened, is also explored in some detail. The pro-intelligence debate may be more comprehensively explored,

in part acknowledging its understandable appeal to a frightened public, but CJ's flippant responses and inability to answer some of her boss's impassioned challenges provide strong signs of Sorkin's views on the issue.

### **Themes of Tolerance**

In his debate with CJ, Toby mentions profiling in a tone and context that signifies his distaste for the practice. However in the days following the attacks, many distasteful practices were proposed by a community unable to understand why the intelligence community hadn't been able to prevent the tragedies. Sorkin used his second storyline—Chief of Staff Leo McGarry's interrogation of staff member Rakeem Ali—to make real the potential consequences of the inherently narrow-sighted prejudices of racial profiling in a way no Presidential Address ever could.

Making extensive use of the conventions of the espionage genre—the lighting, the set, the interrogation style and process—Sorkin manipulates the many interpretive frames the audience have developed to progressively build both the interrogators' and the audience's suspicions until finally, someone breaks:

L (interrupting) No. I'm trying to figure out why anytime there's terrorist activity people always assume it's Arabs. I'm racking my brain.

RA I don't know the answer to that, Mr McGarry but I can tell you that it's horrible.

L Well that's the price you pay.

RA (after a long pause) Excuse me?

*The West Wing's* White House is a liberal democratic White House. For its Chief of Staff to find such stereotypes based on race and fear coming from his own mouth shocks him to silence. When Rakeem Ali is subsequently cleared, both the viewer and Leo are left confronted by the real meaning of racial tolerance. Given that the same newspapers that first reported the attacks also reported the first death threats against Arab Americans, this cannot be too frequently stated.

The sharp contrast between Leo's disbelief at what he has said and done, and Rakeem Ali's grim acceptance of his perfunctory discharge when his innocence is established is a powerful depiction of profiling's double-edged sword. There are no apologies, no explanations and for Mr Ali, no surprises. While Leo, and indeed we, may tell ourselves and those we wrong, 'I think if you talked to people who know me, they'd tell you that that was unlike me, you know?', a faltering apology cannot make words unsaid or assumptions unmade. It is no coincidence that the episode closes from this scene to the opening strains of Buffalo Springfield's classic protest song, *For What It's Worth*, as if to invoke the hippy trinity of civil rights, racial harmony and, above all, peace.

### **Conclusion**

The attacks on New York and Washington were, certainly in the eyes of the world leaders, attacks on the entire civilized world. In Australia, we were beset by the same fears, the same disbelief and the same attacks on mosques and Muslims as in

America, albeit on a smaller scale. To my knowledge, no media products were modified in the wake of the attacks, other than to accommodate news specials. But when *Isaac and Ishmael* aired in Australia on 10 October, it was inexplicably without the modified title sequence that featured the cast speaking to camera.

Three central issues feature in both storylines: racial tolerance, civil liberties and American foreign policy. Unlike the other two issues, Sorkin's position on this third issue is not revealed as a simple for or against. Perhaps acknowledging that this was not the time nor the place to make a value judgment on such an issue, Sorkin instead chose to advocate accepting responsibility: that the choices a country makes, even with the most noble of intentions, may not accord with or be appreciated by other countries.

Nonetheless, as part of the global rather than local audience, certain aspects of Sorkin's treatment irked, but only because the underlying policies also irk. For example, for all his bravery and diplomacy in tackling the foreign policy issues inherent in the text, the only reference Sorkin made to another country suffering at the hands of terrorists was to Israel. But *Isaac and Ishmael* never claimed to have all the answers, and to spark foreign policy debate from numb disbelief and horror could well be seen as achieving its intent.

In America, critics were split on *Isaac and Ishmael*'s merits, some accusing it of being 'preachy' and others praising the contribution made by its approach and content to the national recovery. While the experts may have been divided as to whether the experiment was a success, audiences demonstrated their willingness to look for answers in fictional media. *Isaac and Ishmael* received the series' highest ever ratings with 25.24 million viewers.<sup>8</sup> To give this context, audience numbers fell by 10% the following week which was still one of *The West Wing*'s largest audiences.

NBC, Warner Brothers and the executive producers of *The West Wing* took a significant risk in *Isaac and Ishmael*. Commercially, there were questions as to whether there would be an audience. Logistically, it required a virtually unheard of turnaround time to make it to air just 22 days after the attacks. Financially, the interruption to the planned season premiere incurred significant costs in wasted promotion and lost advertising revenue. Moreover, Sorkin waived his writer's fees and all profits from the episode went to September 11 charities. But what they proved was that fictional media could play as important a role as factual media in meeting society's needs, should 'Something' ever happen again.

## Notes and References

1. The author wishes to acknowledge the integrity of Aaron Sorkin, John Wells and Thomas Schlamme in charting new courses, and the courage of Jeff Zucker and Peter Roth in enabling them to be sailed.
2. The Fox Network had planned to screen a repeat of the feature films *Independence Day*, which features the graphic destruction of New York City at the hands of aliens, and *The X-Files Movie*, which opens with an Oklahoma City style bombing of an empty federal building by humans in league with aliens, on the weekend of September 15–16. Both films were pulled from the viewing schedule.
3. Within hours of the attacks, Columbia Tristar pulled from public release a poster advertisement for the upcoming release *SpiderMan* that showed a reflection of the Twin Towers in the eyes of Spider Man's mask. Twentieth Century Television also pulled from syndication a 1997 episode of the animated series *The Simpsons* titled *The City of New York vs Homer Simpson*, in which the cartoon family visits the Twin Towers to reclaim their abandoned car.

4. Financially, various estimates put the total loss of advertising revenue to the networks at upwards of \$US600 million over the six day period from September 11. In terms of the human cost, journalists were working minimum 12 hour shifts and broadcast anchors Dan Rather (CBS), Tom Brokaw (NBC) and Peter Jennings (ABC) were reportedly on air an average of 15 hours a day throughout that period.
5. P. Bernstein and R. Kissel, 'Fatigue frays auds and nets', *Variety*, September 13, 2001, [http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=print\\_story&articleid=VR1117852673&categoryid=14](http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=print_story&articleid=VR1117852673&categoryid=14)
6. M. Errico, 'A very special "West Wing"', *Eonline*, September 22, 2001, <http://www.eonline.com/News/Items/Pf/0,1527,8865,60.html>
7. J. Adalian and M. Schneider, 'Plots are hot spots for nets', *Variety*, September 24, 2001, <http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=story&articleid=VR1117853005&categoryid=14>
8. R. Kissel, 'Wing sings for Peacock', *Variety*, October 4, 2001, [http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=print\\_story&articleid=VR1117853726&categoryid=14](http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=print_story&articleid=VR1117853726&categoryid=14)