The New Atlantis
A Journal of Technology & Society

Seeing and Believing

TV Dramas Show Two Sides of Surveillance Technology

In the information age, all of us live with a vague sense that what we do is tracked. Every electronic step we take produces a record, and in an ever-growing number of public spaces we are no longer surprised to look up and find a camera peering back down at us. This may help us feel safe from those who might seek to harm us, but it also makes us less confident of our privacy. And the knowledge that we are always exposed perpetuates in some quarters an obsession, in particular, with government surveillance equipment.

Two hit television dramas exhibit the complex human response to technological surveillance: *24* and *The Wire*. Both shows shed light on the growing societal awe of surveillance technology while also reflecting our fear and uncertainty about our ability to master it. Although surveillance technology dominates the worlds of both shows—*24*'s built-up city of Los Angeles and *The Wire*'s decaying Baltimore slums—the shows' overarching attitudes towards surveillance differ greatly. Fox's *24* bows in awe of the omnipotence and omnipresence of satellites and fiber optics, while HBO's *The Wire* regards phone taps and recording devices suspiciously, as flawed tools that reveal the corrupt nature of bureaucracy and are, at best, necessary evils. Thus, the difference between the two shows is one of belief: one's view of surveillance technology is based in faith, the other's in doubt.

The shows bear some similarity: Both are critically acclaimed television series with labyrinthine narratives that survey law enforcement personnel and criminals. And both echo contemporary political realities: the war on terror and the war on drugs.

But the shows are fundamentally different in outlook and attitude. In *24*, super-spy Jack Bauer and his team of alpha-nerds at the fictional Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU) equip themselves with determination, creative information-seeking techniques, and government-funded technological muscle to take on expansive rings of richly-funded terrorists. (For those few readers who may not know the show's eponymous gimmick: *24* takes place in "real time," so that each season narrates

a single, action-packed day in twenty-four one-hour episodes.) The show is bloated with incident, but there's hardly any nuance. It is a brutal pulp soap opera—obvious, morally simplistic, and consistently over the top. Despite its often grim violence and its notorious ease with torture, it is essentially hopeful: With a little sacrifice and decent tech support, the good guys win.

The Wire—a gritty social drama that showcases the interconnected lives of cops, drug dealers, and public officials—tends to emphasize technology's limitations. The title, in its explicit reference to wiretaps, introduces the show's preoccupation with the tracking tools employed on both sides of the drug war. The show deals bluntly with race and class, ego conflicts, and institutional indifference—all with an unyielding pessimism. A portrait of urban decline and despair, it serves as a bitter elegy for America's inner cities, skeptical of both hope and progress.

These differing attitudes manifest themselves in each show's treatment of surveillance technology. In *24*, it appears as abundant, powerful, and chic—the solution to every problem. Its universe is a techno-utopia, and the limitless power of surveillance equipment is an article of faith for CTU agents. In CTU's sparklingly high-tech hub, video phones and multiple computers adorn every desk and walls are decked with flat-screens, illuminating rooms with the cold glow of TV light. Few staffers leave their desks during the day-long season, save occasionally to pass the baton of top-secret information to a comrade. For all practical purposes, the CTU office is their home, their natural environment, their sanctuary. Surveillance technology surrounds them, and they live by it, trusting in it for survival.

Such trust is also reflected in their speech. Conversations are peppered with sophisticated-sounding technical jargon, and though it is essentially meaningless, the characters on the show act as if it is of grave importance. Terms that appear to have been carelessly lifted from idle IT-department chatter—routers, grids, servers, screens, filters, subnets—all get rearranged into various befuddling combinations and delivered with maximum force and certainty. Empty dictums like "Open a socket" and "Send it to my screen" serve as all-purpose conversational placeholders, rote expressions used to delineate one's position as a fellow believer. Consider the following exchange between two agents trying to trace a phone call:

> **Agent A:** The number strings are caught in a loop matrix.
> **Agent B:** Did you try running a Satcom overlay filter?
> **Agent A:** That only works on cell-to-cell communications. This call was placed from a hard line.
> **Agent B:** Well, NSA recently started using satellite carrier systems as a backup for all phone traffic. I'll just have to reconfigure the embedded decryption program to—got it.

Such chatter clearly doesn't mean anything, yet the characters speak it

emphatically and act upon it with resolve, because they know—or rather, believe—that technology will deliver. For the characters on *24*, it is a matter of faith; technology is the higher power that compels them to act, and there is no limit to its ability.

In particular, CTU's surveillance capability is virtually without boundaries. No computer security is too difficult to hack; no image too distorted to make scrutable; no location too remote for satellites or surveillance cameras to peer in. Bad guys are forever destroying or encrypting important files only to have CTU technicians handily salvage or decode the relevant sections.

Here are just a few examples taken from the course of the show's six-season run: In the pilot episode, Bauer cuts a finger off of a slain bad guy and uses an in-car fingerprint scanner, complete with Internet connection, to send an image of the villain's print back to CTU. Near the beginning of the fifth season, a rogue CTU agent (one of the show's staples) uses a wireless laptop to tap into the CTU network and create a real-time graphical readout of the location of 167 FBI agents who had swarmed an L.A. apartment building; the process takes just minutes. At the beginning of the current season, one of CTU's analysts decides that, having given up control of the organization's normal surveillance satellites (the details are both complicated and superfluous), he should hijack a conveniently located private satellite to look down on a field operation in progress—and with just a couple of keystrokes, he has a perfect view of the action. The simplicity of these acts matches the show's simplistic moral outlook. Both are essentially hopeful visions: Evil can be defeated, and technology can solve all.

There are, of course, technical snafus aplenty at CTU, but they are usually due to human errors in usage or decision-making, not inherent limits of any technology. In general, technological proficiency promises success.

In contrast to *24*'s awe-struck parade of technological glamour, *The Wire's* treatment of surveillance technology is dingy and downtrodden—a skeptical vision where greed and apathy drive human action and technology is as flawed as its creators. Its world is mired in self-serving bureaucracy, a tangle of inaccessible systems that exist only to perpetuate their own power. Computers, communication devices, and surveillance equipment are no different: Costly, complex, and imperfect, they are the tools of elites—an integral part of Baltimore's ongoing turf wars, both on and off the streets.

Contrary to *24*, which pays little attention to the costs of surveillance technology, *The Wire* counts every penny. Episodes from the first season show officers still filling out reports on typewriters and (even though cell phones were already fairly common) tapping street-corner payphones. It's the inverse of *24*'s utopianism: a harsh, world-weary economics where there's no such thing as a free computer.

Several subplots have made the expense of technology more explicit.

In the second season, two officers are forced to spend their own money on a tiny audio bug that fits inside a tennis ball. These officers, living on city cop salaries, can't actually afford such a device, so their plan is to return it and get their money back after using it—a plan that goes awry when the ball is crushed in traffic. The most recent season features a similar subplot in which a surveillance camera is stolen by a gang of drug dealers. The officer in charge of the operation, not wanting to be billed for the expensive camera, lies to his superiors about its whereabouts—landing him in serious disciplinary trouble. The message is clear: Technology always costs, and sometimes the price is more than financial.

Even when technology is available, its complexity can be daunting. The show's main characters are either blue collar public servants or lower-class urbanites who have limited access to technology and are intimidated by simple communications tools. The cops are stymied by simple keypad codes used by drug dealers. One cop becomes a teacher and needs a student to help him learn to use his classroom computer. The dealers, in turn, are all too aware of the police presence, and they constantly lecture each other about what is and isn't permissible to say on a phone. As much as the equipment might be necessary, it is the source of constant frustration.

Such frustration is exacerbated by the often flawed results provided by surveillance equipment. Sometimes these results are comedic—such as an incident when police misinterpret a dealer's comment about killing his "dog" as a street-slang reference to having killed a friend—only to find out that his use of "dog" is not slang, but is, in fact, a reference to a pet. At other times, imperfect results prove dangerous, such as an episode in which an officer wearing a wire is shot because the location information she calls out can't be heard over the din of a blasting car stereo. Like the imperfections of man, the imperfections of technology are cause for both grim amusement and tragedy.

The imperfections of man are, for *The Wire*, a further reason to distrust surveillance technology. Throughout the show, surveillance technology is regarded as a tool of the elites. Government bureaucracies, corporations, police hierarchies, drug gang command structures, and naked politicking all play pivotal roles in determining who has access to the equipment and the information it provides. Like all turf, it is jealously guarded. Not only do the bureaucratic elites have no reason to make access easier, they have an incentive to perpetuate these barriers to entry, for these barriers are what prop up their power and position. The corrupted institutions of society are the show's highest authorities, and surveillance technology—with all the access and power it affords—is subject to the whims of those institutions.

In the end, both *24* and *The Wire* traffic in a sort of meta-voyeurism: Their appeal is based in no small

part on giving us the ability to watch others watching. Both shows recognize the power granted by surveillance technology; it gives its users the ability to peer into others' lives. These shows replicate and multiply that power for the viewer, reeling us in with a multi-layered voyeurism that, through television, brings that power into viewers' homes.

At its core, the power of surveillance is the power to know others. The most basic function of surveillance is to tell who someone is—whether a terrorist, a drug dealer, an informant, an enemy, or a friend. Both shows reflect this: Their use of surveillance is inextricably linked to questions of identity. In *The Wire*, the detectives slowly piece together surveillance data that they hope will prove that someone is a criminal. In *24*, surveillance information acts as a guide to the myriad terror webs that crisscross the globe; each new clue tells CTU who to talk to and why, serving up data that might provide more complete knowledge of a suspected terrorist. In these shows, the old adage is most certainly true: It's not what you know—it's who you know.

In our hyperconnected age, we too increasingly know others through electronic means: blogs, websites, text messages, profiles on social networking sites. More than ever, their reliability, scope, and control are issues of daily importance in determining who we know and what we think we know about them. How do we know when to trust what we find in search engines or streaming news sites? When should we discount our electronic eyes and ears, treating them as imperfect creations of imperfect beings? And when should we bow before their power to inform us? If so much interaction depends on electronic tools, can we ever truly know anyone? *The Wire* acknowledges our fear that we never will; *24* gives us hope that, with faith, we might.

—***Peter Suderman*** *is managing editor of National Review Online.*