

The Art of Political Shit Stirring

Jeffrey Jones, Old Dominion University

How do societies know themselves? One answer should seem obvious: through media. But which media? When David Simon decided to use the news business for *The Wire*'s thematic dénouement, he announced that journalism has failed society as an institution capable of helping citizens know, and then begin to address, the societal and institutional failings that *The Wire* had painstakingly pointed out. Despite Simon's own mythologizing of American newspapers as formerly great institutions, I believe he is correct in pointing out that newspapers are now incapable of offering "the rigorous, painstaking examination of issues that might, in the end, bring us to the point of recognizing our problems, which is the essential first step to solving any of them." Investigative reporting was a special commitment that publishers and editors offered to truth. It was expensive, but it provided society with compelling narratives that not only mobilized passions, but also often instigated action through the light it placed on its targets.

Can other media—in this instance, fictional television—help society in similar regards? For many dedicated viewers of *The Wire*, I believe the verdict is a resounding "yes." Simon is quite clear in arguing that "fiction is fiction, and it should in no way be confused with journalism." Fair enough. But Simon simultaneously recognizes that this fictional television program was able to offer a set of "truths" that have gone "unaddressed by our political culture, by most of our mass media, and by our society in general." In doing so, he notes that the show intentionally tried "to provoke, to critique and debate and rant a bit. We wanted an argument....Nothing happens unless the shit is stirred. That, for us, was job one."

Thus, can this series enliven and/or re-engage the governmental infrastructure in discussions of entrenched social problems? If so, how? Do we force officials to sit in closed rooms and watch television? That is as ridiculous a response as requiring as standardized testing is in supposedly improving teaching, learning, knowledge, or reducing poverty. Perhaps the place to start, instead, is realizing the power that television narratives can have in leading us to see differently, to provoke debate, to garner attention, to shine a light on societal problems. Certainly Ed Burns realized that it was the act of producing television (not being a cop or school teacher) that gave him a special place at the table, and that finally made his stories "matter." As the *New York Times* reported, "Burns said he was surprised by all the attention *The Wire* received from policymakers who were piqued by the show's gritty civics lessons—the very sort of people, he said, who more or less ignored him when he worked in the public sector. 'The irony is that you have to be somebody before anybody listens to you,' he said. 'I wasn't an expert when I was an expert, and now that I'm not an expert, I'm an expert. It's kind of curious.'"

It shouldn't seem curious to TV scholars that the medium has the power to speak in ways that other media cannot; to focus attention and scrutiny; to scold; to humanize and offer compelling stories; to produce empathy, sorrow, and outrage; and so on. It is precisely the relationship between the first set of questions posed by this roundtable with the second set of questions that makes this show meaningful. Only through such complex storytelling could this series produce the reaction that it has. Nor should it seem curious that television can bring people to the table,

including politicians and policymakers who might look just like the CYA careerists and connivers portrayed in *The Wire*.

Perhaps Simon realizes this as well when he offered a muted call to action precisely because he believed in the show's latent political potential. He writes, "If you followed us for sixty hours, and you find yourself caring about these issues more than you thought you would, then perhaps the next step is to engage and to demand, where possible, a more sophisticated and meaningful response from authority when it comes to such things as the drug war, educational reform or responsible political leadership. *The Wire* is about the America we pay for and tolerate. Perhaps it is possible to pay for, and demand, something more." Simon has called the show "a political tract masquerading as a cop show." The question, of course, is whether the television industry is capable or willing to produce more such political tracts given the political economy of the industry. Or is *The Wire* simply a "beautiful mutant," as Simon once described *The Sopranos*, something that basically cannot be repeated with such scale, beauty, or passion? We must await answers to these questions.

In the meantime, I do know that we can dispense of the critique that the political conversation that a show like *The Wire* produces is tempered by its relatively low ratings. The political importance of *The Wire*, as with programming with similar ratings such as *The Daily Show* or even Fox News, is not something that can be measured by referring to Nielsen numbers or their equivalent. Instead, *The Wire* (as with these other two programs/channels) has demonstrated a new way of talking about public life through American television. The specifics of exactly how that is the case must await our discussions in Austin.