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WHITE BLACK LEGAL is an open access, peer-reviewed and refereed journal provide dedicated to express views on topical legal issues, thereby generating a cross current of ideas on emerging matters. This platform shall also ignite the initiative and desire of young law students to contribute in the field of law. The erudite response of legal luminaries shall be solicited to enable readers to explore challenges that lie before law makers, lawyers and the society at large, in the event of the ever changing social, economic and technological scenario.

With this thought, we hereby present to you

# **FROM COURTROOM TO SCREEN: THE INFLUENCE OF LEGAL DRAMA ON PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE LAW**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Legal dramas have been a consistent part of popular culture, and they have a big effect on the way people view the legal system. The series law & order gave us famous courtroom battles and the good wife made us meet morally complex lawyers—these shows have all contributed to the way people perceive and interact with the law. Viewing legal dramas as a source of entertainment that frequently simplifies convoluted legal ideas, they also, to some extent, manipulate the realities of legal practice, thus, producing unrealistic expectations of how the justice system works. The dramatic courtroom victories and quick resolutions portrayed in movies and TV shows can make it seem that law is more accessible and predictable than it actually is. On top of this, legal dramas play a major role in shaping public opinion on critical legal issues like criminal justice, police conduct, and civil rights. They dramatize high-profile cases or societal challenges, and these shows, in turn, affect the discourse over the justice and the efficacy of the legal system, thus, leading to debates on the need for reforms. The moral clarity that usually comes with legal dramas might be a strong attraction for the audiences but at the same time it is a big contrast with the complicated ethical dilemmas the real-world legal professionals have to deal with.*

*These representations can have an effect on the public's trust in the legal system. They can be a source of respect for lawyers and judges, but at the same time, they can generate distrust about the profession's integrity. In addition, legal dramas can create a scenario where aspiring legal professionals have unrealistic expectations as they might think entering the field is through the heroism of the courtroom only.*

*Ultimately, legal dramas both educate and mislead, providing valuable insights into basic legal*

*principles while glossing over the complexities of real-world law. While these shows can spark interest in the legal field and foster conversations about justice, viewers should remain mindful of the difference between the fiction and reality.*

## INTRODUCTION

The legal profession, with its procedural complexity and weighty consequences, has long served as fertile ground for storytelling. Legal dramas, both on television and in film, are among the most popular genres in entertainment. From courtroom battles to the personal lives of lawyers, these shows often depict the law as both a vehicle for justice and a source of moral quandary. The influence of these dramatized depictions of law has been substantial, leading to the question: how do these portrayals influence public understanding of legal processes and professions?

Although legal drama is frequently a work of fiction, it has roots in real law concepts. Yet, the overlap between what is fact and what is fiction can be hard to distinguish because of how they were created; they were created for entertainment and capturing attention rather than to provide education. As a result, public perception of the laws has increasingly become based on what they see in legal dramas instead of actual practice of law. This paper will explore how legal dramas impact public perception of laws and how the representations of law in legal dramas could lead to real life legal outcomes and professional attitudes toward the legal system.<sup>1</sup>

## MAIN CONTENT

### **The Appeal of Legal Dramas**

Legal dramas balance complex legal concepts with intensive emotional conflict. In addition to providing insight into how lawyers work or how cases are litigated, legal dramas such as "The Practice," "Suits," and "How to Get Away with Murder" provide a dramatic experience for viewers, highlighting themes of justice, fairness, and morality. As a result, a large number of legal dramas portray lawyers as heroic characters striving to achieve justice for their clients. Because of this portrayal, legal dramas will often elicit strong emotions from viewers, resulting in public support and interest in a case's outcome as well as sympathy for the individuals involved.

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<sup>1</sup> *Legal drama*, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopaedia (last visited Dec. 20, 2025), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legal\\_drama](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legal_drama)

The sense of urgency and significance created by the drama presented in a courtroom, particularly during high-profile criminal cases, can increase public awareness of legal proceedings. For example, "CSI" and "The People v. O.J. Simpson" depict a level of detail regarding the analysis of evidence, the prosecution and defence's arguments, and the jury's deliberations that can sometimes conflict with people's understanding of the actual legal process. Through these various portrayals, viewers become invested in what will happen in these cases and the future of the people involved.

For example, the case of *Chandler v. Florida* (U.S. Supreme Court, 1981)<sup>2</sup>. The primary legal issue was whether televised coverage of a criminal trial violates due process. Held that the Court held that allowing broadcast coverage of criminal trials does not automatically violate a defendant's due process rights, provided safeguards protect fairness. Relevance: This decision reflects the Court's recognition that media presents factual reporting or dramatized coverage which may be permissible, but must be carefully regulated to avoid prejudicing jurors or altering public perception of judicial fairness.

### **Shaping Public Perception of Legal Professionals**

Often, the characters that portray attorneys in film and television can be overly dramatized and not necessarily a reflection of real-life attorneys. Similarly, the character of an attorney in some shows tends to be depicted as the quintessential lawyer - extremely devoted to his/her profession; he/she will go to any lengths for their client, regardless of personal sacrifice. Conversely, some shows display attorneys as rude, self-serving, or greedy individuals who are only concerned about winning their case and are willing to compromise their ethics to do so. Because of the blatant differences between both types of lawyers shown on screen, many people may develop a skewed perception of lawyers in real life. A study conducted by the American Bar Association found that when people think about real-life attorneys, they base their opinions on how attorneys are portrayed on-screen. For example, the portrayal of idealistic, charismatic, and persuasive lawyers, who will do whatever it takes to win, causes many people to have unrealistic expectations of how quickly and effectively attorneys will handle a case, which, in some instances, can lead to disappointment when clients come to expect such dramatic results after watching a few episodes of shows such as *The Good Wife* and *Better Call Saul*. The media portrays lawyers in a way that can impact the perception of

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<sup>2</sup> *Chandler v. Florida*, 449 U.S. 560 (1981)

the various areas of law<sup>3</sup>.

The portrayal of lawyers in the media also affects the perception of specific areas of law. For instance, criminal defense lawyers may be seen as sympathetic defenders of the innocent, even when they are tasked with defending those who are guilty. Similarly, prosecutors may be depicted as paragons of justice, even though the actual work of a prosecutor is more nuanced, requiring a balance of legal strategy, ethics, and the pursuit of truth.

### **The Impact on Public Understanding of Legal Procedures**

Legal dramas frequently cut the legal process down or simplify it to fit the constraints of the small screen or of films. A courtroom trial, for instance, is usually depicted going at a very fast pace with the most interesting and dramatic moments happening almost in no time at all. On the contrary, legal cases, mainly criminal trials, can take years to resolve, with lots of delays, motions, and procedural complexities that are not shown being represented on screen.

In addition to this, legal dramas have often overdone the efficiency of legal proceedings. A case would be solved in the duration of just one episode in *Law & Order*, for example, from the crime scene to the courtroom, and this could cause the audience to think that the time and the effort people really spent on the case were much less than they actually were. The oversimplification of the legal process may result in public enlightenment in a wrong way about how law is applied in real life. Besides that, it is also a factor that sustains a misconception of the whole legal system, particularly of criminal trials, being quick and sharply decisive, which in real life is almost never the case.

Moreover, making lawyers and judges do things like that in movies shows that they have these superpowers to untangle complicated legal matters and all that in no time thus making the audience think that the law works with a high degree of certainty and efficiency. This is, however, opposite to the reality where legal cases are often unpredictable and complicated.

### **Ethical Implications and the Role of Legal Drama in Shaping Justice**

Legal dramas, in their own way, have a very big impact on the public perception through their

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<sup>3</sup> Matt Suoja, *TV and Film Portrayals: How They Impact the Legal Profession*, Law Week Colorado (Mar. 1, 2023), <https://www.lawweekcolorado.com/article/tv-and-film-portrayals-how-they-impact-the-legal-profession/>.

depiction of justice. To put it differently, the continuous emphasis on the importance of justice made many legal dramas to highlight the good and the evil arguments in the court, making the law to be seen as a tool to put back what was moral in the society. But then, this view of justice is, at times, too simple. In real life, the imposition of the legal system does not always have such clear lines, and the final verdict could come about as a result of the interplay of different and complex factors like precedent, legal interpretation, and procedural rules.

Besides, legal dramas also very much present audiences with moral quandaries, thus characters are made to wrestle with their conscience. A case in point is that of the TV series Breaking Bad, where the main character Walter White's switch from a struggling teacher to a powerful drug dealer can be seen as a radical and still very debatable challenge to the classical idea of justice. Depictions like this can change people's opinions of what is right and wrong in terms of legal matters throughout society.<sup>4</sup>

Raising a point here, how do the legal representatives and the media producing the legal content actually deal with and distribute public perception of justice, so that it is always more ethical and less ambiguous or even shapeless? How much leeway should the public have in its comprehension of the law based on fiction? While attractions of people's interest to social topics are among the main purposes of entertainment, the legal system being seen as less than trustworthy and for being misunderstood by the public sometimes comes as a result of the oversimplified or sensationalized portrayal of justice.

For example, the case of *Sheppard v. Maxwell* (U.S. Supreme Court, 1966)<sup>5</sup>

The primary legal Issue was whether pervasive media publicity denied the defendant a fair trial. Holding was that the U.S. Supreme Court held that Sam Sheppard did not receive a fair trial because of *massive, pervasive, and prejudicial media coverage*, which affected courtroom proceedings and public perception. The Court emphasized the need for a trial judge to protect the defendant from prejudicial publicity to preserve due process. Relevance: This case is a cornerstone in recognizing that media narratives and coverage, even if not fictional dramas, can prejudice jurors and the broader public, undermining a fair adjudicative process.

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<sup>4</sup> Pulkit Mittal, *How Legal Dramas Shape Public Opinion About Justice*, JusCorpus (Aug. 13, 2025), <https://www.juscorpus.com/how-legal-dramas-shape-public-opinion-about-justice/>. (Jus Corpus)

<sup>5</sup> *Sheppard v. Maxwell*, 384 U.S. 333 (1966)

## CONCLUSION

Legal dramas, while compelling entertainment, have a profound effect on how the public perceives the law, legal professionals, and the justice system. By focusing on high-stakes, emotionally charged courtroom drama, legal dramas create narratives that both educate and mislead. While they can inspire viewers with their depictions of lawyers and judges fighting for justice, they can also distort the complex realities of the legal profession and the slow, often frustrating pace of real legal proceedings.

As these shows continue to dominate popular culture, it is important for viewers to approach them with a critical eye. The role of legal dramas in shaping public perception cannot be underestimated, and it is crucial that viewers remain aware of the difference between entertainment and reality. Moving forward, there may be opportunities to leverage the popularity of legal dramas to promote a more accurate and informed understanding of the law, one that acknowledges its complexities and imperfections while still celebrating its potential to seek justice.

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