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HBO's *The Wire* and Criminal Procedure: A Match Made in Heaven

Brian R. Gallini

Fans of *The Wire* know Bunk. Those fans who are legal minded may even remember, in the first scene of the first episode of Season 5,¹ when Bunk masterfully interrogates a helpless suspect. I cannot imagine a better introduction to the Fifth Amendment materials in the Criminal Procedure course.

But *The Wire*'s five seasons offer more than just helpful scenes. Rather, the show raises a diverse array of Fourth and Fifth Amendment issues that, I believe, can assist in teaching the Criminal Procedure course throughout the semester by keying all the course's topics to *The Wire*. I proceed in this piece by offering (1) why *The Wire* makes for such a compelling pedagogical tool, (2) why a "one show" approach is superior to using sporadic clips from a variety of sources, and (3) then offering some concrete examples of how the clips are helpful on a class-by-class basis.

Why *The Wire*?

The Wire takes viewers into the inner-city streets of Baltimore for an in-depth look at the highly lucrative drug trade. Using a wide array of colorful characters, it treats viewers to a morally and legally complex world where police, prosecutors, defense attorneys, drug sellers and drug users all serve as compelling personalities living out the American drug war.

Against that captivating backdrop is a more specific appeal to law professors—how all of *The Wire*'s characters interact with the Bill of Rights. Throughout its five seasons, the show provides an extraordinary number of discussion-worthy scenes that magnificently bring complex constitutional doctrines to life. At varying points, for example, police investigators rely on GPS trackers² and phone taps on disposable cell phones,³ and engage in

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1. *The Wire: More With Less* (HBO television broadcast Jan. 6, 2008).
2. *The Wire: Storm Warnings* (HBO television broadcast Aug. 10, 2003).
3. *The Wire: Reformation* (HBO television broadcast Nov. 28, 2004).

captivating interrogations involving high-level international⁴ and domestic criminals.⁵

The show is, in short, a rich source for bringing Supreme Court criminal procedure jurisprudence to life. Moreover, the show moves, which nicely illustrates for students how quickly an officer must make split-second decisions in the field when applying the law. Showing scenes from *The Wire* in class tasks students with having to make their own quick decisions and to think on their feet.

The “One Show” Approach

Many professors, I suspect, rely on an assortment of multimedia clips through the semester that come from a variety of sources. Using *The Wire* as the singular source of media clips in the classroom is different. But I have found that doing so has at least two tangible benefits that other approach lacks.

First, relying on a singular show throughout the semester allows professors to quickly dispense with introductory matters. Explaining the show and its characters right away “pays it forward,” so to speak, by thereafter allowing the class to speak the same language in terms of the geographic area, the characters and the plot lines. This allows for a certain continuity and efficiency in class discussions.

Second, the “one show” approach creates buy-in because students get interested in *The Wire*. I have found, as more time passes since *The Wire* ended its run in 2008,⁶ that only a handful of students have heard of *The Wire* and fewer still have ever actually watched it. That all changes once the semester begins and they see a few clips in class. Students often approach me during the semester and tell me that they have started watching the show. Many students will also share a scene with me that they are interested in discussing. I find it rewarding that students are thinking about the material in new ways outside the classroom.

How to Use the Clips

Identifying how to integrate and rely on *The Wire* clips is not an easy task. Anytime I rely on a clip in class, I give the students an overview of which characters are involved and what major plot lines will arise. In other words, I try to give students just enough background so that they do not find the clip disorienting (as though they were walking into the middle of a movie). Here are four possible ways to integrate the show into the classroom:

First, I rely on *Wire* clips to replace the casebook notes following a case; these notes might include hypothetical problems. Professors often pose

4. *The Wire: Port in a Storm* (HBO television broadcast Aug. 24, 2003).

5. *The Wire: One Arrest* (HBO television broadcast Jul. 21, 2002).

6. *The Wire* (TV Series 2002-2008), IMDB.COM, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0306414/> (last visited February 23, 2014).

alternative in-class problems to students. Regardless of method, professors likely relay them verbally. Instead of these more traditional methods, I often call on a student and ask her to evaluate a *Wire* clip in the context of the topic being discussed.

Second, I utilize *Wire* clips as a substitute for the facts of a main case. In traditional law school classroom dialogue, professors might call on students to provide the facts of a particular case to begin discussion of that case. Rather than relying on that method, I will often play a clip from *The Wire* and then ask a student how the court in the assigned case would resolve it. As part of that discussion, I find it easy to integrate the facts from the assigned case.

Third, I trust clips from *The Wire* to introduce new material. At the beginning of a new block of material, I regularly play a clip that poses broader thematic problems in that particular area of law. For example, to introduce the materials on police interrogation and confessions, I might play for students the scene in *The Wire* where Herc and Carver beat Bodie in an interrogation room.⁷ I ask, if the detectives do not plan to introduce Bodie's statements in court, can't they rely on his statements to further a broader investigation? As I'm sure you can imagine, students participate in the ensuing discussion in impressive numbers.

Finally, I feature *Wire* clips to close down a block of material. Sometimes, as many readers know, there are multiple constitutional issues raised in a single scene from *The Wire*. When that happens, I save the clip to review a broader block of material rather than a specific piece of doctrine.

Conclusion

The Wire is a fantastic and largely undiscovered teaching tool. Relying on *The Wire* in class facilitates both enhanced student buy-in and consistency in classroom presentation. I hope some of my suggestions encourage you to adopt the "one show" approach and key *The Wire* to your syllabus.

7. *The Wire: The Pager* (HBO television broadcast June 30, 2002).