Letter from the Editor (Common Law: An Analysis of Media Misconceptions)

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New developments in knowledge, technology, and culture have brought about changes in many aspects of our society, including laws and the legal system. Our vast and complex legal system permeates nearly every aspect of American life; it is only natural to wonder about Americans’ perception of our modern legal system.

This year’s theme for Juris, the modern American’s perception of the legal system, grew organically among the public, exposing the people’s perceptions about the legal system and discussing how law can better meet our nation’s needs. Our arrival at this theme should not be surprising, given the public uproar over financial, political, and socioeconomic institutions, intensified by the recent Occupy Wall Street movement.

The modern American legal system has been molded through the collection of a vast quantity of verbiage about the history and content of America, and it is often difficult to understand how our legal system became such a jumbled entity. With 50 separate state governments and court hierarchies beneath the federal level, the American legal system is more complex than that of any other nation, and our country has more lawyers than any other by far. It is a monument to human ingenuity and social cooperation; however, the general public is not impressed with the system. In fact, most people consider it to be appallingly excessive.

Almost since the advent of television, legal scholars and practitioners alike have contemplated the impact of law-oriented entertainment programming. Research suggests that a majority of people in the United States form much of their impressions and knowledge of our legal system based on what they see and hear in the media. As cultural products, television programs and images are conceived as reflections of society. Consequently, during the last decade, scholars have begun investigating the impact of pop cultural representations of law, such as dramatic and reality shows, on the public. Legal fictions, such as the “CSI” effect and the Nancy Grace effect, were spawned from this reflection theory. The “CSI” effect, for example, has been labeled a 13th juror, informing the layperson’s expectations and beliefs about the efficacy of the particular form of evidence and the conduct of trials.

We explored a variety of other legal issues affected by the media, mainly how women in law are perceived and how the media contributes to that perception; privacy on the Internet and the law’s constant struggle to keep up; and the Medical Examiner’s office and clearing up myths created by media.

Building on the public theme, we explored public interest law and its increasing popularity among law school graduates in addition to the importance of clinical work in law schools and its benefit to the public. Law school graduates are increasingly aware of the importance of public interest law and not just as a result of the economic downturn, but genuine desire to help people in need by providing them access to justice. Working in the public sector can be a valuable stepping stone to other career opportunities, much like clinical experiences in law school. As the world and the legal profession change, law schools must prepare the next generation to fulfill the roles as our advocates and leaders. Clinical work allows a student to gain a strong foundation in legal theory, learn the skills necessary for success in the changing legal profession, and gain awareness of their ethical and public service responsibilities.

These points represent only a few of the questions explored in this issue of Juris. As the media and other external factors continue to have an influence on the law, the public and their perceptions of the justice system will have a direct impact on our future. It is important to always explore the underlying legal issues and perspectives presented by these influences. By doing so, we can continue to grow both in our legal system and our nation.

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