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Understanding Public Perceptions of Law through Communication

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ABSTRACT

Understanding public perceptions of law is crucial in a society where legal norms and practices influence nearly every aspect of daily life. Yet, the law remains opaque to many due to complex legal language, institutional inaccessibility, and mediated narratives that often misrepresent legal realities. This study investigates how communication through mass media, social media, legal discourse, and interpersonal interaction shapes individuals' understanding and perception of the law. Drawing on legal geography, social constructionism, and communication theory, the research explores the co-production of legal meaning and the socio-spatial contexts in which law is interpreted. Using mixed methods, including text mining of Turkish news coverage and interviews conducted in Izmir, the study reveals how associations such as justice, punishment, and authority form diverse and often contradictory frames of legal understanding. It further highlights the role of media narratives, digital communication strategies, and cultural influences in constructing both trust and skepticism toward legal systems. The findings offer insight into the challenges and opportunities of translating legal knowledge for broader public comprehension and underscore the need for inclusive legal communication strategies to foster civic engagement and trust in legal institutions.

Keywords: Public Perception, Legal Communication, Media Influence, Social Media, Legal Discourse, Legal Literacy, Law and Society.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the law is challenging; actions and structures of the legal system are not always legible or easily translated into terms meaningful to individuals. Nevertheless, the law pervades many aspects of daily activity, and actions impinging on longstanding controversies around the role of law are pervasive within society. This legal geography remains embedded in ongoing transformations as law is worked on and offline, as scholars continually seek to account for the place-shaping and place-marking provocations of law. Key in that work is the question of how the meanings, materialities, and performances of law transform with the fluid and complex milieus within which the law is embedded and wherein law is made and remade. It is about understanding the relations between legal form and the micropolitical processes that carve it out of many possible shapes. This, in turn, directs attention to the socio-spatial practices through which the different elements of a legal order are computed, experimented with, and regulated and to the myriad forms of translation through which different aspects of the law are attributed with stability and made to lock together in a given moment. Attention to law in everyday life forms is cast as a form of translation provides a theoretical apparatus for grasping the contingent and contested processes by which legal knowledge is coproduced, as well as an epistemological and ethical imperative to situate more expansively understandings of the violence done and experienced as law is moved around [1, 2].

Theoretical Framework

Meaningful access to legal processes can be enhanced by understanding perceptions of law and legal communication. The legal field can be viewed through multiple lenses, with social constructionism providing a foundation for comprehension. Recent cognitive communication research uncovers vital interactions among law, social factors, cognition, and communication. Presenting a case to a jury aims to connect on a human level. A compelling story involves character, conflict, and resolution, echoing the fundamental narratives of law. However, solely relying on interpretative aspects of language, particularly where "ordinary meaning" fails both parties, poses challenges to the communication aspects of law and may limit resources. Legal communication is a broad field that intersects various branches of law and external schools of thought, aiming for a broader understanding of communication within legal processes and strategies to manage it. Conversations that hint at criminal activity have First Amendment implications, potentially hindering the ability of individuals to scrutinize governmental actions. People's perceptions of law can be shaped by their understanding of legal information. Typically, this knowledge is superficial or context-specific. Basic communication theories help unravel nuanced arguments created by the government, which use ambiguous language and advocate for specific beliefs through structured reasoning and renaming concepts. This critique examines not only how law is perceived but also recognizes its existence, focusing on perceptions independent of legal enforcement. The law is viewed as an international entity, and many citizens believe the legal structure governing them is not inherently problematic. These insights motivate a desire to understand the material surrounding law, limiting the analysis to the context of the United States and its political communications [3, 4].

Methodology

Public perception of law may depend on both mass media and daily life experiences. While both media studies and law studies investigate law as a subject, law studies conceive law as norm/dogma, whereas media studies conceive law as communication/discourse. This study aims to understand thematic concepts on "law" based on the latter approach. Accordingly, the public sentiment of "law" in Turkey will be examined, determining which concepts are attributed to law, how they are mediated, and what implications/associations are built. In this respect, both quantitative and qualitative methods will be used. The quantitative approach will examine the news coverage on law in Turkey using text-mining techniques between January 2017 and January 2018. The qualitative approach will focus on daily life and interpretation of law through in-depth and semi-structured interviews with 30 participants in Izmir, Turkey. Results show that law is related to various functioning concepts through which a differentiated network of associated concepts is built. Law combines both a norm definition, with terms such as legislation, rights, and justice, and associative definitions, with concepts like punishment, murder, and order. Pattern analysis and association also show that law order is one of the most prominent frames mediated with law. Conflict, punishment, and protest are among the second group. The former network is mostly attributed to government security decisions and the latter to critiques against these decisions. An epistemological framework that differentiates the conceptions of "law" and its implications will be extended here. This approach considers in what areas, in which ways, and with what implications public opinion and view of law are formed and communicated [5, 6].

Public Perceptions of Law

Legal professionals, as well as the lay public, may often divide contemporary living into the world of law and the world of facts. For one, it is commonly seen as the experts' role to describe factual circumstances and normative ones. Observers, on the other hand, may not ascribe high importance to legal standards or may lack an understanding of these. At the same time, legal norms, in fact, guide the lives of 21st-century individuals more and more intensively. Everyday life is interwoven with legal rules: in policies, employment, domains of justice, etc. Moreover, statements given by legal professionals or public administrators embody implicit or explicit reference to the law. The issue, then, is not just the extent of perceiving the law but also the right perception of it. Socio-cultural references, individual life stories, or also significant others will all be involved in how contemporaries perceive legal practices and narratives, how they construct 'the world of law.' As members of democratic societies, lay people may be expected to have a certain, basic understanding of law. Some critics would even expect this from citizenship, as various doctrines of popular sovereignty suggest. However, law may remain very hermetic to many, either because they insufficiently know legal norms or read judgements. There may exist different levels of the perceptions of law and legal actors. On a basic level, laypeople may inaccurately understand the

rights and duties around them. Also, normative conflicts may appear between different sets of norms, legally valid or not. On a higher level, some topic areas or legal fields may appear as very unclear or complex. Equally, specific groups of legal professionals, such as magistrates or scholars, may lead to more confused perceptions. Public perceptions of law that laypeople build up will influence behavior towards law or attitudes toward legal actors. This view may be tied in with a sociological perspective rather than a literal, text law approach. Rather, a naïve understanding of the law may suffice. Cultural, social, political, as well as ethical considerations, will go along in shaping perceptions of law [7, 8].

Role of Media

This study is particularly focused on the examination of the role of communication in shaping public perceptions of law. The first components of a legal system behavior developing into law and construction of the legal system are firstly explored. Then, the British case of the interaction between two types of media and public understanding of law is examined. This analysis draws on official statistics of media production and reception as well as the findings of audience studies. The results suggest how narratives about crime in the national press and social justice in television output are only loosely connected to actual legal events. Moreover, the coverage in each medium is contingent on the other. The frequent narratives about successful crime fighting and law breaking increasingly support conservative authority, trust in particular groups, and blame of others. This output has become divorced from reality LAW applying in the lives of the audience. After his release from prison in 1994, P. L. moved town, keen to put his racist past behind him. He changed his name, his appearance, and his friends. He even found a job boasting he could speak five languages. In 2005, he was back before the courts, charged 19 race-related offenses, including a GBH attack on an Asian restaurant owner and incitement to commit violence. One of P. L.'s childhood friends claimed they had taken part in racist attacks when they were teenagers. After seeing P. L.'s photograph in the paper, he had called the police. From then on, they'd been watching him. P L. was jailed for 4 years [9, 10].

Media Influence on Perception

Media can play a significant role in forming and altering public perception of various issues. Many studies have demonstrated that the way events are represented in news accounts can dramatically affect how the audience interprets them. This subsection looks specifically at how the media's portrayal of law, legal events, and legal issues can shift attitudes toward these subjects. Cases will be presented that illustrate the power of news accounts to create, perpetuate, or change public opinion about law. The effects of psychological factors such as social learning and familiarity that can amplify the media's influence on viewers' and readers' perceptions are examined. Finally, the potential for the mass media to generate bias or public misunderstanding about law and legal process is considered, and the possible implications of such misconceptions for individuals and for the criminal justice system are discussed [11, 12].

Social Media Dynamics

Social media platforms are increasingly shaping how law and the legal system are perceived by the public. As shown by, social media is an arena in which legal discourses, debates, and conversations take place. Interpersonal tweets about law from individuals directly involved in a specific legal occurrence were collected to examine how the ambient audience – users with no connection to the legal event – engaged with these personal legal tweets. These tweets were then analysed episodically (primary, retweet, answer), showcasing the provision of attention and care to those affected by the legal event. Personal legal tweets from non-primary users act on 1 another to reorient focus toward the affected individuals, and as they do so, they align with bonds towards available narratives about justice. Tweets by individuals without personal ties to a legal event interrogate what justice is, care for individuals, and call for justice in a variety of forms. Tweets from individuals directly involved in a legal event offer ambient users a narrative catalyst to reflect upon, leading to a discussion about broader societal expectations about the law's response to injurious occurrences. Through an analysis of user-generated content, it became apparent that power invested in expert legal agents enables a capacity to craft ambient discourse and, in doing so, shape public prerequisites of law [13, 14].

Communication Strategies

When people seek to understand their rights and responsibilities in society and the systems that enforce them, they often look to lawyers, judges, lawmakers, and other legal professionals. These individuals' understanding of law, however, typically contributes to their professional expertise and judgment on legal matters — it may not provide the empirical information or perspective necessary for an individual

citizen or stakeholder to navigate the legal system. To enhance the public's understanding of law, legal professionals and legal institutions can strategically communicate some aspects of law. What might be the most effective approaches, tactics, and strategies for doing so? Outlined below is a collection of such efforts, drawing on the rationales and effects of each identified tactic or strategy. There are multiple ways of translating and communicating information about law, setting legal rights and obligations in generative language, that can enhance public understanding and foster a society that is increasingly informed about the law and the legal system, and as a consequence more capable of civic participation. Message tailoring: Information about legal rights and responsibilities can be communicated in many ways, each with its strengths and weaknesses, and the effectiveness of law communication partly hinges on how well the message is tailored to its intended audience. Stated differently, to be successful, legal communication campaigns must be inclusive. This inclusive approach is evident in campaigns that make legal information easy, accessible, and comprehensible to diverse audiences. In the same vein, the legal information disclosed in digital public spaces should be clear, straightforward, and digestible to all sectors of society capable of navigating the digital realm, particularly because digital platforms have become common tools for various groups of people to seek out information, including about the law. In practice, this regulation has taken the shape of several digital tools and consumer-protecting efforts aimed at increasing transparency around how the legal sector operates and what clients can expect of it, creating more informed consumers and in turn pushing legal practitioners to standardize fees and be more transparent and honest in their representation [15, 16].

Challenges in Communication

Communicating the law is essential for its function in society. Legal principles rely on communicative understanding for efficacy. There are multiple challenges in communicating the law, chiefly to laypersons. Common barriers are found frequently in the public's perception of the law; among them are poor drafting, jargon, and far too complex regulations. Two notable barriers to academic and creative communication are the multiplier effect of structural inadequacies and societal attitudes towards the law. Socioeconomic background can predict understanding of legal principles. Public perception of the law is skewed heavily towards fear, with significantly worse understanding of personal than general legal rights. The public tends to believe crime prevalence is driven by government manipulation and sensationalist media, leading to offline implications. The causes of disquiet about accessing legal rights are rooted deeply in class divides as certain areas inherit systemic errors by design. Retired judges advocate for simpler legal language since jargon and legalese obfuscation dulls 'the sunlight' of the law, inhibiting scrutiny of legislation and legality. Last year, a city high school successfully implemented two years of mandatory law education for years 8 and 9, enabling students to discuss topics such as parliamentary sovereignty, entrenchment, and rights erosion. A local arts collective was also founded with the purpose of demystifying concepts [17, 18].

Implications for Legal Practice

There are numerous implications of public perceptions of the law. A key question is how such knowledge helps those who practice the law and to what extent it can and should inform that practice. Lawyers discern the law in different ways, principally according to its application to specific instances. Thus, public opinion about cases in the courts might be relevant to legal decision-making. There is a practical significance in understanding, for example, juries, costs, and jurors to determine legal tactics. The relationship is not unidirectional, nor should it be all-encompassing. A large part of the practice of the law also engages contestations of its meanings, and this means addressing perceptions of the law that might not in some respect accurately reflect what the law 'is'. In a broad civic sense, there is a significant substantive agenda for lawmakers and those involved in law reform. Knowledge of urban fears about the law-formal and informal, which might in turn inform government policy, may help shape a more balanced law- one which is perceived as comprehensible, efficacious, and workable. The significance of this resides not just in public fears about law but also in those misconceived public perceptions that prevent effective responses by those responsible for law enforcement. If there is a pervasive fear of crime, and if this is underlain by significantly 'wrong' perceptions about the nature of crime, who commits crimes and how, or the efficacy of certain types of punishment, then formal punishment will often be seen as an ineffective deterrent. In these circumstances, lobbying or legislative reform to in fact reduce more crime will achieve legal credibility more from public opinion when founded on more robust public understandings about law and order and their interconnections. As events in Rodney King's neighborhood in the spring of 1992

underline, the danger is that perceptions of active law enforcement, no matter how misconceived, are likely to override official policy measures. A sophisticated focus group methodology, alongside the predominantly variable-focussed work of criminologists, could assist policy makers in developing an informed, clearer, and more consensual understanding of the public's fears, concerns, and misconceived perceptions in matters connected to law. This, it is argued, could in turn contribute to the more sustainable reparation of a fractured relationship between formal and informal agents of social control [19, 20].

Future Directions

What one communicates and how it is communicated can lead to differences in how legal issues are perceived. This can be seen by looking at medical marijuana, a controversial issue where state legislative messages and local newspaper coverage reflect different aspects. Legislative messages highlight how the state's divergent views are united in policy adoption, and local newspapers commonly frame compliance with medical marijuana legislation as a costly burden. Understanding of the internalization of communicative details on public perceptions of law is advanced. Specifically, cognitions emerging from legislative messages and local newspaper articles about Michigan home rule give way to antecedents of perceived need for law, perceived law efficacy, and generalized law perceptions. In short, the results indicate that United States citizens do benefit when governing bodies maintain up-front details in law change discussions to inform the public. General Principles of Understanding Public Perceptions with Regard to Law and Legal Systems can be found in studies in scholarly journals. The law is sometimes seen as a daunting entity. How one might understand the law is as varied as the ways it is administered, interpreted, and written. Law, in its breadth and scope, has overwhelmed many a student. It has frustrated many a scholar. It has tied many a lawyer in knots. Yet, to the mighty power brokers of this world—those with unlimited resources, unbridled ambition, and an unbending will to cut through the gnarled jungle of human society—knowledge of the law provides unquestionable power. That so many find the law such hard going, coupled with one being able to buy small forests' worth of the stuff at any well-stocked bookstore, is a paradox for some—a hidden secret lodged in plain sight, available to all yet beyond the ken of most. Perhaps it is the sheer weight of the off-putting texts. Alternatively, it may be the treasure troves of Latin phrases, references, and citations that are strewn through legal documents. Or it could be that the rules, restrictions, obligations, and powers, and the syllogisms this spawn, are simply too much for the browbeaten Western consumer, blinded by ease of access, instant explanation, and immediate satisfaction. Either way, the perception of law is always entrenched within the context in which it is found, used, written, and to which it is applied [21, 22].

CONCLUSION

Public understanding of law is not solely derived from formal legal education or direct interaction with legal systems but rather through a complex interplay of media representations, cultural narratives, and lived experiences. This study demonstrates that law is not only a set of codified rules but also a social construct communicated and understood through discourse and symbolic interaction. In Turkey, as in many contexts, public sentiment around law reflects both normative associations with justice and rights and critical associations with punishment, conflict, and authority. Mass and social media play pivotal roles in shaping these associations, sometimes reinforcing misinformation or deepening distrust. Communication strategies that consider socio-economic background, media literacy, and narrative framing are essential to closing the gap between legal professionals and laypersons. Legal institutions must prioritize clarity, accessibility, and inclusiveness in their messaging to foster greater legal literacy and civic participation. Ultimately, improving how the law is communicated can support a more informed public and a more transparent, equitable legal system.

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