

The Role of Media in Shaping Public Perception of the Law

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ABSTRACT

The media are a powerful intermediary between the public and the legal system, influencing perceptions of justice, legality, and fairness. This paper investigates how media framing, agenda-setting, and portrayal of legal issues shape public attitudes toward the law and legal institutions. It examines theories of media influence, including agenda-setting and framing, to provide a theoretical framework for understanding this relationship. The paper discusses how various forms of media—traditional, digital, and social—convey legal information and the potential consequences of selective representation and sensationalized reporting. Case studies of high-profile trials highlight the implications of media coverage on public opinion and judicial processes. The paper concludes with recommendations for responsible legal reporting and suggests areas for future research in the intersection of media, public perception, and the law.

Keywords: Media influence, Public perception, Legal system, Agenda-setting theory, Framing theory.

INTRODUCTION

Media plays a central role in shaping how its members view the world. For decades, scholars have attempted to understand this relationship, exploring how media can affect the public's perception of particular social problems and influence public attitudes toward certain topics. In applying this framework to the law, researchers have explored the role media plays in shaping public perception of public knowledge about the legal system, the administration of justice, and the understanding of key legal topics. As such, the media may play a crucial role in alerting the public to important legal developments. Similarly, how the law and its operators are portrayed in the media has been found to affect public confidence in the administration of justice and in the likelihood of achieving a just outcome in a particular case. Thus, understanding how media representation can affect public attitudes toward justice and its operators is an important topic of research in legal studies [1, 2]. While the role of media in shaping public perception of the law is important, it is also essential to explore the complexities involved in measuring the link between media indications of the state of justice and public perceptions of the same. This question explores the extent to which the media can play a substantial role in engendering misunderstandings about the law by vitiating public perceptions. There is the added factor here that, while traditionally media refers to print and broadcast media, the proliferation of new media technologies has also begun to impact how we understand these relationships. For example, new media technologies, such as blogs, chat rooms, and social media platforms, provide a radical democratization of opportunities to report and follow reported legal events as they unfold [3, 4].

Theoretical Framework

Over the last few decades, it has been more and more generally accepted that the media plays an important role in shaping the attitudes and perceptions of the general public concerning a vast array of social and institutional phenomena. As for the legal system, there is no escaping the conclusion that media influence and shape individuals' perceptions of the operation of the legal system. However, designing and adopting adequate theories is particularly difficult within the social sciences and about specific phenomena such as media influence [5, 6]. A first group of theories, called "reticulist," has been developed focusing on the agenda-setting power of the media. These theories, therefore, tend to focus on the selection and prioritization of topics in the news, prioritization or editorial "gatekeeping" leading to silence: the choice of not covering certain types of legal events at all. The second perspective suggests that social actors are selective in what facts or evidence they draw upon when constructing or providing meaning about legal

phenomena. This involves two types of focusing: first, have the media "focused" on civil or criminal litigation? More importantly, what are the various "frames" that the media employ when presenting the law and how do these interrelate both with each other and with their presentation of public dispute resolution at more general levels? This type of work is important in that it suggests how media effects can be transmitted. For example, if the media present the law as both a narrow and technical form of litigation and only dealing with a few victims, the audience's general propensities to accept the iteration of private disputes in the courts will be diminished. Administrative or regulatory litigation may sit rather uncomfortably with other forms of criminal or civil justice [7, 8].

Media Influence Theories

Media often shape people's intuitions and perceptions. Several theories in mass communication suggest that media have a huge influence on public beliefs in a consistent manner. For instance, the agenda-setting effect theory stipulates that mass media editors "are more than gatekeepers," as they have the power to construct and prioritize headlines. They say, "Agenda-setting is the process through which items could create impact, setting attention into motion." Although the media do not tell citizens in which direction they must believe, they are still important as they determine the area in which citizens are likely to have beliefs. This would produce a public consensus and a clear overall score, as citizens receive total attention. The influence of political knowledge and other intervening aspects on the link between media use and the framework impact is also analyzed [9, 10]. A related theory, the framing theory, contends that the shape of the broadcast can influence the opinions of the audience. It contends that "a processing and accumulating principle relates to the theory of the concept... within the broadcasting context." This is also known as the information integration theory. The credit for formulating the framework as a theory is provided to Erving Goffman, who argued that "the main organizational rule of mass media discourse is to present facts in a good perspective." Quite a few studies employ example-based methodologies, concentrating mostly on media representation or relating media portrayal to citizen attitudes or perceptions and evaluations of justice and policy. We see the theoretical contributions of these papers coming from an agenda-setting point of view and from the literature on the effect of "tuning" the public on media reports. These reports show that mass communication research, which mostly focuses on agenda goals and, to a smaller degree, on framing effects, reveals a large degree of policy concern in the news, broadly consistent with justice. People have greater knowledge of roles than most of the policy studies show [11, 12].

Media Portrayal of Legal Issues

In various forms of mass media, legal issues are presented and interpreted by the general public. In doing so, journalists bear a heavy responsibility to report the law accurately and in a manner that does not unduly manipulate public perceptions. Media reports have power and can create unjustified community concerns. Those sources of media with a large and often well-educated audience, such as television current affairs and highbrow newspapers, are capable of creating a false impression of legal issues that can mislead public opinion and seriously erode community confidence in the legal processes or institutions. This phenomenon has been described as "multiplicative elitism," for it is not just that media reports reflect and validate the concerns of a select portion of the community more accurately and in more detail than is often the case with other media reports. They create the perception that concern in this section of the community is widespread [13, 14]. The vast majority of legal stories reported by the media are criminal trials, associated arrests, inquests, and corruption scandals. Even legal developments with a human focus, such as a review of the law of assault or domestic violence, tend to be reported because of a specific case involving fact situations that could excite the salacious interest of the reader. Similarly, the "progress" of a complex and well-publicized long-running fraud trial is more likely to be reported than other complex business litigation. Television offers news and current affairs, entertainment programs, dramas including courtroom dramas, true-life stories, and crime shows. Newspapers compete on news, sometimes offering different versions of the same story. Some newspapers concentrate on information in more depth, more investigation, letters to the editor, readers' comments, and reader focus on the issue. Online news delivery is a relatively new method of communication with enormous potential, as illustrated by the recent trends and developments of news websites. There have been and will continue to be new applications and developments of online news delivery. Regulatory changes may stimulate this growth, but other issues such as intellectual property and copyright need to be resolved. Movietown is far removed from reality. Legal education, insofar as it occurs, comes not from producer-distributed material or fictional portrayals, but from investigative journalism-public reports that disseminate information about criminal cases and offer insights into investigative techniques and legal practice. These reports often reveal mistakes, omissions, or unprovable allegations, and they are a gross departure from the

sanitized reporting of legal issues that concern the media judiciary. Newspapers encourage their reporters to investigate and reveal incompetence, corruption, or conduct amounting to an abuse of power on the part of public functionaries and private citizens [15, 16]. The news media possess enough power to 'make' a crisis if none appears to be available, or conversely, to 'unmake a crisis' by ignoring it or underreporting it. They have the power to shape the way an issue is defined and framed and to set the list of questions on the public agenda. They have the power, by omitting certain facts from a story, to exercise selective participation in the shaping of public consciousness. Thus, the decline in the dissemination of legal information owing to increased concentration is an issue of significant concern, but so is the tendency in news reports to trivialize legal issues. Proprietary concerns, characteristically, are capitalist concerns, and these are concerned mainly with the search for profit. At best, this makes legal information a discretionary product. Overall, legal information probably remains what it has always been, a commodity with continuous consumer demand and a profit potential. Moreover, there are so many variations of news and current affairs report with both similar and contrasting depictions that the impact of consent manufacture through selective representation would, at least in part, be offset [17, 18].

Types of Coverage

Hard news, features, analysis, and opinion pieces are the categories of media coverage in a legal context that have been said to influence public opinion. The influence of sound bites in the first two and controversial headlines in the latter two are seen as shaping the way the media can portray the legal system. The suggestion is that people receive their legal information from media sound bites or that these sound bites are often the only thing the public takes from media legal coverage. Furthermore, the use of algorithms and artificial intelligence to target media reports to certain groups within society can lead to this audience's existing biases being reinforced [19, 20]. Hard news has been identified as the media category considered to most strengthen the public's prejudice against possible jury tampering. Hard news is described as the presentation of facts without comment or interpretation. Also known as cold or objective news, it presents news in neutral mode. Feature articles are more in-depth than regular stories to introduce new trends and newsmakers. The features allow more freedom to choose stories and tell them in a more colorful style than in hard news pieces as long as the basic facts are included. Both the features and opinion pieces have the added quality of being regularly rewritten by sub-editors. They are beaten up by taking out of the document - in its first few paragraphs and last few paragraphs - what is known as a billow, i.e., a summary of the story. With the billow, the feature or opinion piece makes a good read. The billow version holds all of the hysterical to-ing and fro-ing of the main story. However, each time the article is shortened, the repetitive laws must be taken out. Then follows the gritty news story because the editors are treating the feature the same as other news articles. However, these publications are in a different format, and if the billow is removed, then the feature or opinion piece is, in fact, a formal news publication without a strong headline [21, 22].

Case Studies

It is no secret that the media holds a great deal of power in generating and entrenching representations of events in criminal justice. In high-profile cases especially, the media has the power to shape these representations with narrative frames, thereby exercising a great deal of power in shaping public perceptions of law and legal systems. In the next section, we provide a few examples of public responses to various high-profile cases to flesh out theoretical abstractions a bit. The first two examples are highly publicized and dragged on for a considerable amount of time in the press; the last example, on the other hand, came and went in the popular press eye in the space of less than six days. All three cases can provide insight into public responses to events deemed worthy enough to cover and bring discussion and representational politics to the surface for a population. In this section, we identify several important aspects of each of these studies [23, 24]. In 2013, CCTV pictures of the two friends laughing as they made their way through the streets on the night of the assault were printed in a British tabloid, which was the first of several pre-trial publications across most mainstream newspapers as well as across a myriad of TV news programs. The tagline, "The smile that hid her secret hatred," inverted the representation of the two women, making headlines as an 'acid' attack 'cultural jihadist' or cross-referencing it as a possible barbed warning that such attacks had been on the rise between racially loaded figures [25, 26].

Landmark Legal Cases

Landmark legal cases often involve attendant contexts and not merely warrant discussion in their own right but also allow for their use as a focal point for broader social and cultural discussions. They are landmark in the senses that they: (1) might elicit significant public reaction and media coverage; (2) underscore mainstream cultural notions of particular ways of "doing justice" or "being orderly"; (3)

engage social movements, cooperative agents, or interested bystanders who affect or implicate the trial and its main actors or inspire the use of the case as a topic for subsequent fictional or non-fictional recollections and analyses; and (4) have a long-term influence on popular views about the criminal justice system, whatever the verdict or subsequent events in the case [27, 28]. The media have often decided the portrayal of these trials with "timing determining the meanings and the moral evaluations given to such complex issues." The Trial of the Century-type coverage could affect outcomes as the media could report a story in such a sensational or biased way that vilification of the criminals or the alleged criminal could ensue. Social movements may respond to the media portrayal; in the case of the "Central Park Jogger" case, advocacy groups drew a connection between what happened to Ms. Meili, an affluent white woman, and the everyday experience of women of color, although it should be noted the portrayal of the case did not engender any activism supporting the accused. Playing a role in shaping public reaction to a trial, which could mobilize people out into the street, media portrayals of landmark legal cases are also significant in having an influence on public views about the criminal justice system. The public makes some connection about the legal institutions with these "law on the streets" cases [29, 30].

Implications and Recommendations

It is clear from the review that the media creates and structures particular narratives that shape an audience's perception. It can construct a perception of risk, the distribution of crime and harm, and also can legitimize individuals by consistently reporting on certain events in a particular way. It is also clear that these influences extend to perceptions of the law and legal institutions, and in particular the judiciary. In more recent research, there is also speculation that media coverage of judges may affect judicial decision-making. The implications of these concerns suggest that both legal and non-legal individuals should be aware of the effects of the media, and there is a need for media professionals to consider in more detail how they report on legal issues. Overall, the manipulation of the law's legitimacy requires immediate attention in an age that is hostile to 'experts' and 'elites'. The following people should be aware of perceptions in the media: media professionals. The section makes several recommendations. Media publications and journalists should report accurately on matters relating to the law and legal profession. This may require experts in the legal profession to be contacted in the event of publicizing an overview of an ongoing trial. Legal experts should make themselves available for comment in the media. The matter reported should provide a balanced overview of trial procedures, as this assists people in understanding the purposes of rules about evidence and legal argument. Additionally, it will ensure that the public supports and complies with the decisions of the courts. Journalists should present a clear and balanced overview of any case reported. Statements that are not opinions, but instead simple facts, should be correctly stated. Issues that cannot be reported fully and accurately are best left for factual reportage once the case is over. Magazine publications should avoid sensationalizing and over-reporting on violence and sexual assault. Child witnesses should not be exploited by the media. Jurors should be treated with respect, and journalists should avoid any action that could undermine the integrity of the jury. Items to be reported in the media should be within the guidelines of the existing law. It is possible that this research can be expanded further into the area of media regulation. The interaction between media and the law is an area that is yet to be considered in depth. Media owners are confined to publishing the truth. In media, 'the truth' is a subjective issue for me. Also, the media should have an open-door policy in order to allow the general public to access unbiased news.

CONCLUSION

The media wield significant influence over how the public perceives the legal system, shaping attitudes through agenda-setting, framing, and selective coverage. While media outlets have the power to inform and educate, their portrayal of legal issues often prioritizes sensationalism over substance, potentially eroding trust in legal institutions and the judiciary. High-profile cases demonstrate how media narratives can amplify public reactions and, at times, impact judicial outcomes. To mitigate these risks, journalists must adopt ethical practices, prioritize accurate reporting, and avoid sensationalized representations of legal matters. Collaboration between legal professionals and media practitioners can enhance public understanding of legal processes, fostering trust and transparency. Additionally, stricter media regulations and public awareness campaigns about the nuances of legal reporting could improve societal perceptions of the law. Further research is needed to explore the evolving role of digital and social media in shaping legal narratives, as well as the long-term effects of media coverage on public trust in the justice system.

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CITE AS: Kagaba Amina G. (2025). The Role of Media in Shaping Public Perception of the Law. EURASIAN EXPERIMENT JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES, 6(1):1-6