

OPINION

Law and popular culture

Law and Popular Culture is a relatively new subject of study. It is only recently that American, Canadian and UK journals have published special editions that deal with this theme. The June edition of the *Alternative Law Journal* contributes to this area by providing an opportunity to explore the significance of law and popular culture within an Australian context.

Why do we need to know about law and popular culture? Is it just an excuse for those of us who like watching law films and reading crime novels to justify the time we spend on these pursuits? The articles in this edition suggest that studying law and popular culture can help to reveal mass media/mass society attitudes about law and the legal profession that can help us to develop a greater understanding about what the Australian public really think about the law. It can show the legal profession how they are perceived by the general public and it can provide a 'common ground' of shared understanding which can be a starting point for discussion between lawyers and non-lawyers.

Paul Joseph argues in his article on *Law and Science Fiction* that many people rely on popular culture for their understanding of law and the legal system. He suggests that movies, television programs and other popular culture elements play a dual role in both shaping and reflecting beliefs about the law. This raises particular issues in Australia because the majority of law films and television series, except for programs like *Fallen Angels* and the recently released film *The Castle*, are American. In *Learning Law from LA* the authors question how this impacts on the audience's perception of law. Does the Australian public learn about American law and lawyers rather than about our own legal system?

Of course, popular culture is not just about films and television series, newspaper reports also form part of popular culture. The articles by Jenni Millbank and Jude McCulloch demonstrate the value of using this resource. Jenni Millbank refers to press reports when she explores the issue of access to fertility services for same sex couples. Jude McCulloch demonstrates how the media construct stories about police shooting.

However, the study of law and popular culture is not just about attempting to understand the public perception of law and lawyers. Popular culture materials may also be the subject of legal regulation. For example, issues of copyright may arise in relation to popular music, video clips and icons. In her article on copyright protection of Multimedia, Tanya Aplin asks whether items such as computer games are adequately protected by existing copyright laws.

There are numerous other areas for discussion. Sport, for example, is part of this growing discipline.

So what are the benefits of studying law and popular culture? The articles suggest that it provides us with an opportunity to understand how the public perceives law

and lawyers. It also enables us to understand how various aspects of our culture are legally regulated and controlled. There is, of course, one additional benefit — it is fun. When you next watch the latest law series or read a crime novel you no longer need to feel that you are wasting time. After all, it is research!

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