

CRIMINAL JUSTICE and the MEDIA:

JUDGES ON TELEVISION

The number of television shows featuring judges “in action” has grown substantially over the past two decades. One of the earliest court shows was *People’s Court*. First airing in 1981, *People’s Court* typically featured disputes between acquaintances, and Judge Joseph Wapner would hear arguments from both sides before making a decision, all within a 15-minute segment. In later episodes, Harvey Levin, who went on to found the website TMZ.com, provided legal insight and interviews from members of the public watching the case unfold.

The success of *People’s Court* resulted in many similar shows and celebrity judges, including *Judge Wapner’s Animal Court*, *Judge Hatchett*, *Divorce Court*, *Moral Court*, *Judge Joe Brown*, and *Judge Judy*, to name a few. *Judge Judy* has been highlighted as the “richest” celebrity judge, reportedly remaking nearly \$50 million a year.

The behavior of these judges is not the same as what you would find in a criminal court. In fact, in many cases, if prosecutors, defense attorneys, defendants, or witnesses were treated in court the way these celebrity judges treat participants, accusations of misconduct would likely follow. Kimball (2005) uses the term *syndic-court judge* to describe these judges and explains, “Because the behavior of a syndic-court judge has Nielsen ratings as a standard, they are allowed to engage in acts that would generally not be appropriate



Judges in the criminal justice system rarely behave the way that judges behave on syndicated court television shows.

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in court. The more ‘straight-talking’ that a judge appears, which often means being as mean as possible to unlikable litigants, the better ratings he or she receives” (p. 150).

You are encouraged to watch an episode of a court show and then attend a criminal trial to watch a judge in action. Doing so will demonstrate how “syndic-court judges” have a knack for theater.

Kimball, P. Z. (2005). *Syndic-court justice: Judge Judy and exploitation of arbitration*. American Bar Association. Retrieved from <http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/migrated/dispute/essay/syndicourtjustice.authcheckdam.pdf>