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Real-World Lawyers

When I reflect upon the apparently low esteem in which the public holds our profession, I try to take some comfort in the fact that, if lawyer characters from movies and television were to be listed in alphabetical order, Atticus Finch would appear before Alan Shore.

Unfortunately, I suspect that is not the order in which today's viewing public would place them. It is difficult to think of a recent movie that portrayed lawyers in a favorable light— perhaps *A Few Good Men*, but that focused more on Jack Nicholson's portrayal of an arrogant Marine colonel than on the young lawyers going an extra mile for clients in very difficult straits.

Television appears to present an ever bleaker picture, unless you catch *Perry Mason* reruns on some cable channel. I was recently given a tape containing scenes from *Boston Legal*, *Shark* and *Law & Order*, some of which were used in the ethics program at CLE by the Sea. After viewing it, and being suitably offended, I watched a few episodes to see if the scenes that had been selected were atypical. They weren't.

In two episodes of *Boston Legal*, I saw a judge propositioned, another portrayed as a simpleton, an abundance of abusive language directed by the lawyers at each other and the court, and frequent sexual interludes between partners and associates, as well as lawyers and clients, at a supposedly prominent Boston law firm.

The message of *Shark* is even clearer: Lawyers go out to win, regardless of ethics, regardless of principles and regardless of justice.

After sampling these prime time network drama offerings, I realized how prophetic the Edward Murrow monologues from *Good Night and Good Luck* truly were.

We have a tendency to laugh off programming of this nature because it bears little or no relationship to the real world in which we practice. It is easy to lose sight of the fact that many members of the viewing audience do not have our experience and probably think, or at least suspect, that this is the way lawyers, judges and others in the justice system actually behave. The question then becomes what, if anything, we can do about it.

The State Bar's Communications Department has devoted considerable effort, with a fair degree of success, to educating Arizona's media outlets about the good that lawyers do and their essential role in an ordered society. That's not enough, however. We need your help, as well. We need to have our professional behaviors break down rather than reinforce the stereotypes of lawyers that our entertainment outlets are currently featuring. That's where you come in.

We have now all taken (or been subjected to, in the minds of some) the Professionalism Course required by Supreme Court rule. Every once in a while, break out the "Principles of Professionalism" that were part of those course materials and ask yourself whether you are consistently adhering to them in your practice. Do the same with the Creed of Professionalism that appears in the Bar directory. Consider strongly taking your clients to observe proceedings in their cases so they can see what actually takes place. They will probably find it more interesting than any television show. The next time you are asked to speak to a group outside the profession, and are free to choose your topic, consider discussing the erroneous preconceived notions your audience might have concerning the legal profession.

I am not suggesting that any or all of these steps will somehow lead to the elimination of the seemingly endless onslaught of negative portrayals of lawyers. But it may make your professional and social interactions more rewarding. There is no need for us to be defensive about our choice of profession. To the contrary, we perform an essential role in a society committed to the rule of law, and we do it very well. 

