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Best of Cincinnati for September 11, 2008

Guilty!

Court TV programming sours integrity with sensationalism

By CHRISTOPHER TOMLIN

If you're one of the millions of Americans who can't get enough prime-time television programming about procedural justice, there are several permutations of the wildly successful *Law & Order*. If that's not enough, you'll also find *Crossing Jordan*, *The Unit*, *CSI*, *NCIS*, *In Justice*, *Young Prosecutors*, *Boston Legal*, *Conviction*, *The Evidence* and *Cold Case*, among countless others.

The major networks seem intent to portray lawyers and scientists as new-millennium action heroes, routinely shooting guns, escaping traps, fleeing explosions, running, jumping and generally performing countless tasks which might seem a bit of a physical stretch for most lawyers and scientists in your acquaintance.

Truly, the Hollywood depiction of our justice system is an exciting one. Thank goodness we have Court TV to ground us. The independent cable channel, which debuted in 1991, touts itself as providing -- according to its press materials -- "a window into the American system of justice through distinctive programming that both informs and entertains."

Finally, a network that won't talk down to us! A network that will give us the truth! Truly we, as educated television-watchers, have been hoodwinked enough by the over-glamorization of the courtroom battle -- and Court TV shall give us a much needed reprieve, right?

Not so fast, America.

By day, Court TV's programming looks a lot like CNN for law enthusiasts. Scrolling information bars, well-groomed anchors, in-studio correspondents and live coverage of major trials. With the exception of CNN double agent Nancy Grace, who reports every detail with an unnecessary and zealot-like urgency, trusted figures like ex-Texas judge Catherine Crier and high-profile prosecutor Jack Ford deliver pertinent insider information on the proceedings we're watching. And often it actually does offer an interesting glimpse into the courtroom by folks who know what they're talking about.

Daytime on Court TV sees guests questioning the validity of testimonials, performing entertaining experiments to test the validity of witness' statements and sharply critiquing strategies of the attorneys trying the featured cases.

True, the cases featured are high profile ones: Coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial put the network on the map in 1995, and last year Michael Jackson's trial seemed to be the only thing spoken

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Ex-Judge Catherine Crier talks with guests like actor Tom Selleck about cases under scrutiny on Court TV

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about for several months. And let's be fair, they *are* more interesting than divorce proceedings. But by and large, sensationalism takes a back seat to legal expertise during the daylight hours.

When the sun goes down, however, Court TV *sizzles!* Nearly all the network's validity flies out the window when the nightly prime-time ratings quest begins. Enough of these boring old daytime lawyers, right? They're just standing around talking in a courtroom all day. Let's see some *action*.

Enter *Psychic Detectives*. Enter *Las Vegas Law*. Enter *Hollywood Heat*, *Hot Pursuit* and *Beach Patrol: San Diego*. You've seen prosecutors drone on and on all day, now here's two hours of shirtless fugitives on *Cops*. It's the law -- and it's electric!

By night, Court TV closes the shades on its window into the system of American justice and trots out grisly murderers, casino lowlifes, psychic mediums and hot lifeguards. Terrifying stories of serial killings pepper the evening schedule and daring sea rescues inexplicably replace courtroom objections. Tossing integrity out the window, the network trades bylaws for billy clubs, wiping clean the work it has done all day to bring a valid, technical eye to the justice system and becoming guilty of precisely the sensationalist attitudes it was created to dispel.

As altruistic as the network's endeavors might be, this drastic, nightly change in tone makes it hard to get behind Court TV. The affable, intelligent Dr. Jekyll disappears, and the gruesome, in-your-face Mr. Hyde emerges -- and herein lies the network's greatest injustice. The network's latest slogan is "Court TV. Seriously Entertaining." When all is said and done, at the end of the day Court TV becomes entertainment that's hard to take seriously. ©

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- [Airing It Out](#) Local TV show gives area talent some exposure Interview By P.F. Wilson (April 6, 2005)
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THE WAL-MART EFFECT

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