

Irreverence vs. Disrespect
In media coverage of the Courts
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If irreverence and disrespect are not identical twins, they are certainly fraternal twins. They look so much alike that distinguishing which-is-which often depends on whether you are the one being irreverent or the one being disrespected. If you look closely, however, you can tell one from the other. It's in how they act and especially in the consequences of their behaviour.

Irreverence is the well-adjusted twin, spirited yet incapable of malice. Quick-witted and with an upbeat sense of humour, he offers a healthy perspective often reminding us not to take ourselves too seriously. Although irreverence can be critical, even confrontational, he is never disrespectful.

His brother, on the other hand, is mal-adjusted. He too is clever but harbours a hurtful sense of humour. He can be brutally critical and often attacks on a personal level as well as a professional one. Disrespect revels in cutting everybody around him down to size so as to make himself appear superior.

Now, the focus of this magazine is how the media and the justice system relate to each other. So in that context, the question is; why should we be concerned about the distinction between irreverence and disrespect? Because, aside from its emotional impact on some of the individuals who are the targets, there is a broader and potentially more harmful effect.

What separates a functional and safe society from total anarchy is respect for the rule of law. The legal professionals – those who we might call “the keepers of the rule of law” - who work within the justice system every day certainly understand this. They know how the law is woven into the very fiber of our society. They also grasp the distinction between themselves, the keepers of the rule of law, and the law itself, the tool they use to help maintain a functional and safe society.

But to most people, the rule of law is intangible. It is just a concept. They know it exists because it affects their lives, how they act and how they interact with others. What they can't readily grasp is the distinction between the rule of law and its keepers. They generally define the rule of law as its physical manifestation; the people who make up the justice system - the legislators who write and enact the laws, the police who enforce them, the justice department administrators, the prosecutors, defence lawyers and Judges, the corrections officials, parole board members and parole officers.

Can we say with absolute confidence that video games, car commercials, song lyrics, and other forms of entertainment which depict –if not promote - unlawful activities have no effect on the public's respect for the rule of law? Equally, can we say with absolute

certainty that the disrespect for the keepers of the rule of law being shown more frequently in some press and media coverage of the justice system has no effect on the public's –especially young people's - respect for the rule of law?

This is why we need to learn to recognize the twins; irreverence with his sassy but insightful, productive, and always-above-the-belt criticism; and disrespect who is usually hurtful on a personal level, often irrelevant on a professional one, and who, I would argue, is always destructive.

Disrespect for the keepers of the rule of law, will inevitably lead to disrespect for concept of the rule of law. And we'll take another step towards anarchy, not total anarchy maybe but the anarchy of dysfunction certainly.

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