

As seen on TV:



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STANDBY
POWER

Reality vs. fantasy

in occupational portrayals

on the small screen

by Elka Jones

What television presents isn't always true to life. TV's image of the American workplace is a prime example.

In the TV world of work, many occupations don't exist. And those that do are frequently exciting, even when they're shown as sidelines, symbols, or stereotypes. "When we see an occupation on TV, there is a small but limited relationship to how that occupation really is," says Robert Thompson, director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University. "Learning about an occupation from watching a TV show is like learning how to parent kids by watching sitcoms"—there's some truth, but you can't take it too seriously.

Still, television can be occupationally instructional. "What people actually learn from TV is enormously more important than the inaccuracies," says Jim Elkins, professor of law at West Virginia University and a featured author in the *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*. "TV provides a broader general public understanding. It demystifies occupations."

This article separates fact from fiction by exploring how occupations are presented on television. It discusses the occupational portrayals most often shown on TV: those in the healthcare, crimefighting and crimesolving, and legal fields. The focus here is on conventional shows that are works of fiction—primarily dramas, which usually feature more occupational portrayals than sitcoms do—although some of these observations may apply to other types of programming, including documentaries and television's "reality" genre.

Keep reading to learn what television gets right, what

Watch television for clues about working, and you might be entertained. But watch TV to make career decisions, and you might not be ready for prime time.

it's not showing, and what is fantastically unrealistic. The last section directs you to sources of career information that are more reliable than the small screen.

TV characters at work—sort of

If you're channel surfing for occupational inspiration, you aren't likely to encounter an ocean of choice. That's because the average U.S. worker usually isn't in the script, according to a study published in the winter 2001 *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*. The study's authors, researchers Nancy Signorielli and Susan Kahlenberg, found that, during the 1990's, nearly half of the characters in prime-time TV shows were professionals, such as lawyers and doctors, or in law enforcement—a disproportionate representation of the roughly 20 percent of U.S. workers who held such jobs.

The Signorielli-Kahlenberg study underscores the obvious: a primary goal of almost all television shows is to entertain. "Does TV romanticize everything it touches? Of course," says Elkins. "Stories romanticize everything. There are even stories that romanticize war. The ordinariness of things is made vivid and compelling by TV."

To romanticize what workers do, television zeroes in on some of the more riveting aspects of the tasks done by people in these occupations. In doing so, however, TV does not show what the jobs fully entail. As Thompson says, "People on TV are never doing the minute-by-minute work that they have to do in real life." Television's world of work omits what its creators consider to be boring visually, despite the fact that workers in the real world may enjoy those aspects of their jobs.

An occupation that is shown only partially is easily relegated to the background. As a result, TV characters'

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jobs seldom get a starring role. “Most shows don’t have the occupation as a central feature,” says Thompson. “Rather, the occupation is on the sidelines.”

Sidelined occupations that don’t fade away might become minor script devices. For example, waiters, waitresses, and bartenders are occupations that are often used symbolically, says Thompson: “The way they’re presented, it’s the equivalent of never quitting college, of not having to grow up.” In reality, people employed in these occupations work hard and can gain a lot of satisfaction from their jobs.

When depicted on a superficial level, TV occupations might also reinforce stereotypes—including negative ones. Among those who have tracked their unfavorable television portrayals are scientists, information technology workers, and government employees. A June 1999 study by the nonprofit foundation Media Research Center identified a recurrent bias against businesspeople. “Businessmen are just about the easiest thing to make impersonal villains of,” says Tim Graham, director of media analysis for the center. But not all of the negative stereotyping bothers him. “We’re always more concerned about serious dramas than comedies. The more realistic the show is, the more you have to worry.”

Workplace dramas:

Factual, but fictional, TV

The camera zooms in on emergency medical technicians briefing the nurses as they rush a patient through the bustling emergency room and into surgery, where doctors and other specialists perform a complex operation before the end of the show. On a competing channel, police and criminal investigators work together to collect and examine evidence, interview witnesses, and track down a suspect, all by the time the nightly news starts. On yet another station, a lawyer adept at courtroom maneuvering convinces the judge or jury to return a verdict in her client’s favor in less than an hour.

Do events like these happen in real life? Sometimes, perhaps, but not for everyone in these occupations—and rarely in 60 minutes or less. While many television episodes draw inspiration from the news, weeks’, months’, or even years’ worth of details must be condensed or omitted to conform to TV time.

Timelines aside, some dramas strive to be as accurate and authentic as possible. Producers of these shows often hire, as consultants, people who work or have worked in the featured occupations. But the ways in which these

experts are consulted and the degree to which their advice is taken varies, with mixed results. This section explores television’s portrayals of medical, crimefighting and crimesolving, and legal occupations.

Medical shows: A healthy dose of realism

If the situations on your favorite medical drama seem realistic, that’s because they are, for the most part. “For anything that involves medical procedures or personnel, medical dramas have technical advisers who help show the actor what to do,” says Bree LeMaire, a nurse for 30 years who now writes for a nursing magazine and has spoken with some of the nurses who work on medical

Some TV dramas strive to be as accurate and authentic as possible.

shows. In addition, most of the physicians and nurses involved with the shows, including those who are writers, also have jobs in a hospital emergency room or in a healthcare occupation. “They’re working in the medical field,” LeMaire says, “so what they’re doing is current and realistic.”

Although dramatized TV medical situations are largely accurate, the portrayals are not completely error free. “Emergency medicine is a very difficult field, and some of the difficulties aren’t shown on TV,” says Pam Wood, writer and chief copy editor for *American Medical News*. “For example, the emergency rooms I’ve been in are not nearly as white, not as clean.”

Action-packed emergency rooms are often the setting for TV medical dramas, but that’s not where most medical personnel really work. According to the American Medical Association, only a fraction—fewer than 3 percent—of medical doctors worked in emergency medicine in 2001. And although 3 out of 5 registered nurses were employed in hospitals in 2000, most of these nurses worked outside the emergency room, in departments such as maternity, pediatrics, or oncology.

Doctors, residents, and interns. Most of the tasks that workers perform on TV medical dramas mirror what people in these occupations really do. But small-screen doctors sometimes have responsibilities they wouldn’t have in real life. “On TV, the doctors are the stars,” says Wood, “and they do things, such as counseling patients, that other people—social workers, organ procurement or



TV dramas focus on action, often overlooking routine job tasks like paperwork.

discharge specialists—would normally do.”

Emergency room doctors diagnose and treat patients. To an extent more limited in life than on television, they also counsel patients regarding their illnesses or injuries, and many doctors enjoy sharing advice and support. But the pace of emergency medicine requires real doctors to focus almost exclusively on treatment.

As that and other examples illustrate about doctors’ work, variety may not be the spice of life but of TV. “In real life, for every one trauma, there are probably 30 people who could have gone to regular doctors’ offices,” says Wood. “On TV, you don’t see a lot of repetition. You don’t see doctors telling people with colds and sore

throats to just go home to rest and have some chicken soup, but that happens all the time.”

Doctors’ presence on TV dramas also differs from reality. For one thing, says Wood, television doctors are much more likely than real-world ones to work the same shift as—not to mention strike up a romance with—other doctors. At the same time, says Anne Jones, professor of medicine at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, doctors aren’t the only ones whose TV depictions are unrealistic. “Most of the characters in emergency rooms are interns and residents,” she says, “but I really don’t know many who have as much responsibility as those on TV do.”

In reality, interns and residents work in hospitals to gain practical experience for becoming doctors. Having completed 4 years of medical school after earning an undergraduate degree, they observe doctors and nurses, ask questions, and gradually do things on their own as they finish their residency.

In 2000, there were 598,000 physicians and surgeons employed in the United States, and their numbers are expected to increase moderately from 2000 to 2010. According to the American Medical Association, they had median annual earnings of \$175,000 in 2000 (meaning half earned more and half earned less). Doctors have high earnings, but they also work long hours and may have heavy student-loan burdens—obligations that TV doctors rarely seem to grapple with.

Although television doctoring might highlight the positive, experts say, fictional job satisfaction can’t compete with reality. “To do good—that’s what’s so rewarding,” says Jones, “to be able to make a difference in the life of someone in a way in which that person will appreciate.”

Nurses. As is the case with TV doctors, TV nurses perform many of the same tasks that their real-life counterparts do. Still, say LeMaire and other nurses, television’s depiction of nursing downplays their role as healthcare providers. On television, “nurses are a peripheral presence, with few spoken words,” says Philip Kalisch, a nursing professor at the University of Michigan who has researched the image of nurses on TV. “A shallow portrayal goes to nursing.” Even the best medical dramas don’t do as much as they should to develop substantial nurse characters, he says.

For example, says Kalish, problem-solving on medical dramas is rarely attributed to nurses, even though it is a big part of what they do. “Monitoring vital signs is up to



EMTs and paramedics need to react quickly in emergencies. In reality, not all circumstances are life threatening.

the nurses, and monitoring patients' conditions has an enormous amount of intervention associated with it," he says. "Also, drugs are administered by the nursing staff, and this must be done right. Physicians might write inappropriate medical orders, and nurses must catch these mistakes."

Also in contrast to what is shown on television, says Kalisch, the role of nurses in a real hospital or emergency room is an active, important one. "Physicians visit a patient a few minutes a day," he says, "and the rest of the time, it's up to the nursing staff. Care is delivered by nurses. There are tasks that need to be done, and done well."

In 2000, there were nearly 2.2 million registered nurses employed in the United States, with job growth projected to be faster than average through 2010. Median annual earnings in 2002 were \$48,090. Nurses prepare for

the occupation by earning either an associate or a bachelor of science degree in nursing or through a hospital diploma program.

Nurses spend a great deal of time on personal connections, an aspect of their work that gets little air time. But building relationships is cited by many as being among the best parts of the job. "The patients are wonderful, just jewels," says LeMaire. "They keep you loving what you do."

EMTs and paramedics. Emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and paramedics are portrayed on TV less frequently—and generally less realistically—than are doctors and nurses. Both in real life and on television, EMTs and paramedics provide emergency treatment for patients, usually prior to a stay in, or en route to, the hospital where they receive more extensive care.

Joe Murray is a former paramedic who plays the role

onscreen and also has worked as a medical consultant. His experience suggests that public perception of the occupation causes, or perhaps results from, television's emphasis on the spectacular. "The image of a paramedic is far more romantic and glamorous than the real thing," says Murray, "and prime-time TV has a huge interest in glamour and none in reality."

One example of television's glamorization is the comparison between the dramatized and real recovery rates of people who receive cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), a procedure that EMTs and paramedics are trained to perform. A study, "Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation on Television: Miracles and Misinformation," published in the June 13, 1996, *New England Journal of Medicine*, tracked the way CPR was depicted on television during the 1994-95 viewing season. The study found that on three TV dramas, 75 percent of patients who received CPR recovered in the short term, compared with 40 percent in real life. Similarly, long-term survival rates for TV and real-life patients were 67 percent and 30 percent, respectively.

With EMTs and paramedics portrayed as heroes, it is no surprise that the popularity of these TV dramas coincides with increased enrollments in EMT and paramedic classes. Training includes up to 2 years of instruction and requires formal certification. The most advanced level of EMTs is paramedics, who have additional training beyond that of EMTs that, among other things, prepares them to perform sophisticated, prehospital medical procedures and to administer drugs.

Upon completion of training, however, the unrealistic portrayals from television quickly become apparent to those who made their career choice based on their viewing choice. Realities of the occupation that are largely absent from TV, including the physical and emotional challenges and irregular working hours, become a major source of stress in real life. "Once people start working in the streets, reality hits and they usually exit as fast as they come," says Murray. "There is a huge turnover, partly because what gets us into paramedic work is a mirage, a media illusion, if you will. Reality makes us reconsider."

EMTs and paramedics are projected to have faster-than-average job growth, increasing from 172,000 employed in 2000 to 226,000 employed in 2010. Their median annual earnings in 2002 were \$24,030. But job outlook and earnings are not the rewards cited by people who remain in this occupation. For them, TV may correctly portray its appeal: the split second, life-or-death

decisionmaking required of EMTs and paramedics makes their work exciting and challenging. Using skill and knowledge to attempt a rescue and, at best, save a life can be very fulfilling.

Crimefighting and crimesolving programs: Assault on authenticity

Some of the most frequently watched TV dramas, both past and present, have revolved around law enforcement and criminal investigation. Many television crimefighters and crimesolvers are police and detectives: uniformed law enforcers and plainclothes investigators working at the Federal, State, and local levels. A few are modeled after private detectives and investigators, who are hired by individuals or businesses. Some of these characters specialize in forensics, the use of science and technology for investigating evidence. Others are entirely fictional.

TV crimefighting and crimesolving dramas might show all of these occupations. But they might be all rolled into one worker so that "everybody's doing everything," says Richard Townsend of the Department of Public Safety's crime lab in Salt Lake City, Utah. In

Real crimefighting work is complicated, and crimesolving work is painstakingly slow.

reality, says Rick Alba, the lieutenant of the Crime Scene Investigations Section of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, each crimesolving worker has a specific task.

For example, Alba says, an actual homicide triggers a multifaceted investigation involving many people: "Uniformed police officers secure the crime scene. They'll call homicide detectives and crime-scene analysts. The homicide detectives do the investigating and the interviews. The crime-scene analysts recover physical evidence like fingerprints and DNA, photograph and diagram the crime scene, and chronicle the scene in writing. Then, the forensics laboratory gets involved, with people who specialize in areas such as DNA, firearms, chemical testing, or fingerprint comparison."

Usually, real crimefighting work is complicated, and crimesolving work is painstakingly slow. But the television audience wants resolution. So while TV characters in these dramas seem to work independently through one



Police work is more than the tough-as-nails image that television sometimes portrays.

case at a time until it is resolved—by the end of the episode—these workers in real life have little autonomy and might work diligently for years on several cases, without a breakthrough. “Crimes are typically extremely complex and difficult to solve,” Townsend says. “Many don’t get solved.”

Police and detectives. Helping and protecting citizens in the community are among the most enjoyable parts of the job for many police and detectives. But that is unlikely to emerge from the one-dimensional portrayals that their characters get on TV.

“People would have little knowledge of the reality of policing from watching these shows,” says Cecil Greek, an associate professor at Florida State University’s School of Criminology and Criminal Justice. Tony Lesce, a freelance writer and author of the book “Cops! Media vs. Reality,” agrees, noting that an important aspect of police work is rarely shown on television. “When police are on duty, 30

to 50 percent of their time is spent writing reports,” he says, but “you almost never see a TV cop sitting at a desk to write a report.” Instead, and unrealistically, he says, “every TV cop show you see has a lot of shootouts and car chases. Police work is interesting and challenging, but it’s not a thrill a minute.”

On television, the distinction between detectives and crime-scene investigators is often blurred. But the outcome is usually the same: all success, all the time. “Those shows are all sort of the same thing,” says Townsend. “They hone in on interviews and interrogations. This happens every episode, and in every episode, they get a confession.” Television shows also exaggerate the violence that police and detectives actually deal with, Lesce says, resulting in far fewer scripted appearances of the more prevalent, but less visually exciting, nonviolent crimes.

Made-for-TV police and detectives aren’t bound by

the bureaucracy and rules that real-life officers of the law must follow. "Yes, technical advisers are there to ensure things are consistent with reality," Greek says, "but producers and directors ultimately do what they want." For example, concurs Lesce, "there is a chain of custody when dealing with evidence. An officer doesn't just take a gun out of the suspect's pocket. Things must be documented. The gun would need to be labeled, reports and paperwork filled out." But these procedures are rarely shown, much less followed, on TV.

In 2000, there were more than 830,000 police and detectives employed in the United States, and their job growth is projected to be faster than average through 2010. Median annual earnings in 2002 were about \$42,270 for police and sheriff's patrol officers, \$51,410 for detectives and criminal investigators, and \$61,010 for police and detective supervisors.

Eligibility for becoming a police officer or detective varies, from a high school diploma at the local level to a college degree at the State and Federal levels, and usually includes requirements relating to age, physical fitness, and character. Training varies, too, from a few months of instruction for some police officers to 1 or 2 years of instruction plus experience for promotion to detective.

Police work is dangerous and stressful. But it also can be rewarding, especially for those who specialize in an area of policing that they enjoy, such as working on a task force to combat a specific type of crime. Lesce recommends participation in ride-along programs, which allow civilians to accompany police officers on duty, for those interested in learning about real police work.

Crime-scene investigators and forensic scientists. How realistically are crime-scene investigators and forensic scientists portrayed on television? Not very, according to workers in these occupations.

"I get so frustrated every time I watch (those shows) because it's nothing like what I do," says Claire Shepard, a crime-scene investigator who also writes for a forensic scientist newsletter. Crime-scene investigators work primarily at the crime scene, collecting and preserving evidence and diagramming, documenting, and photographing it. Forensic scientists who work in a crime laboratory perform tests on the evidence collected. People in both occupations also write reports, document findings, and follow established guidelines and procedures.

Their jobs require attention to detail; strong mathematics, scientific, analytical, and communication skills; and an inquisitive mind. Creativity also may be useful

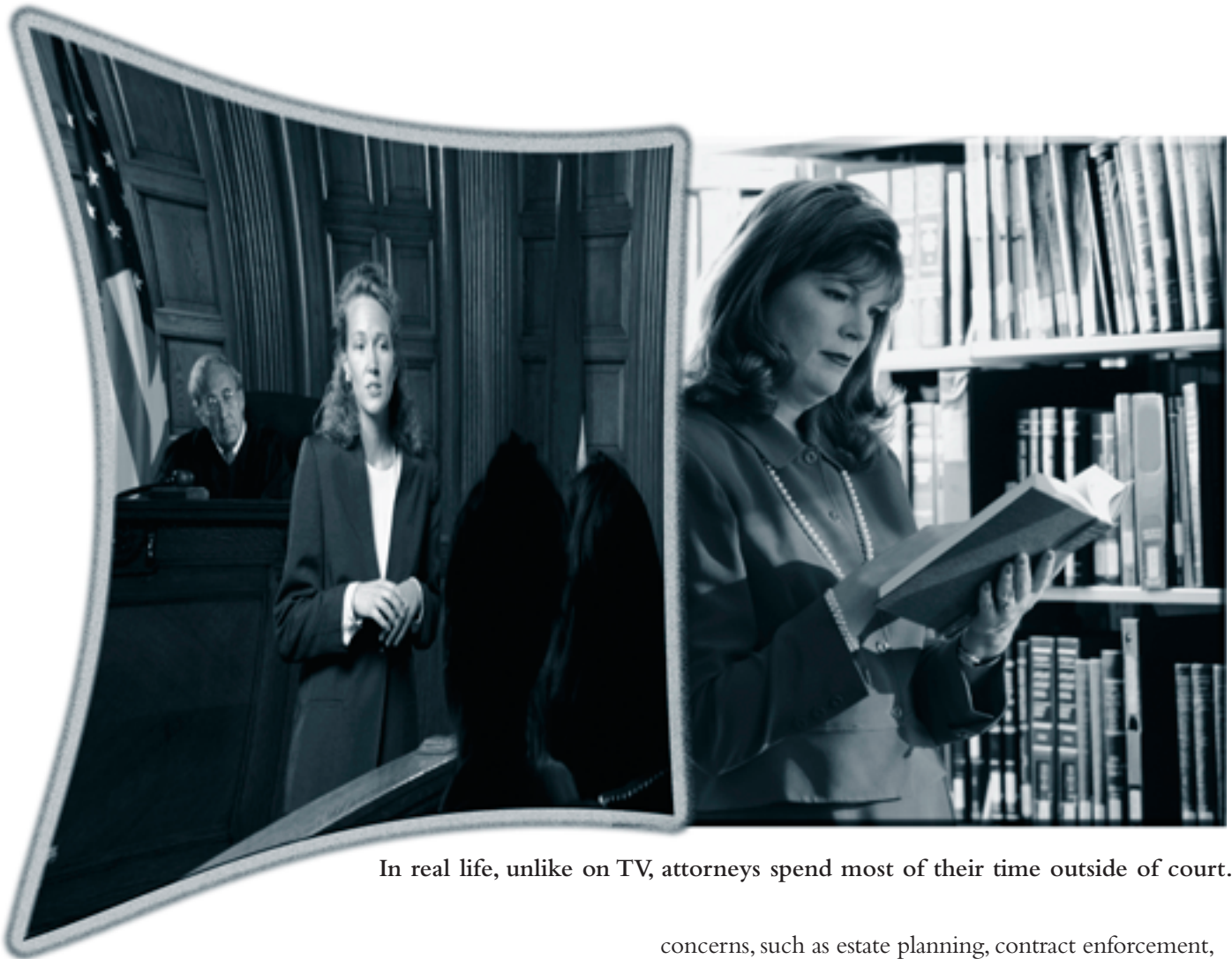
because, unlike their TV counterparts, most crime-scene investigation departments do not have an unlimited budget for equipment. "We have a lot of homemade stuff," says Shepard. "There are a lot of things on the market and on TV that would be great to have, but we can't afford them."

Of course, some of the unreal gear used on crimesolving dramas is just that: it's not real. Technological and scientific discovery have created new options for solving crime over the last decade, but "simple nonsense" is how Townsend describes some of the crimesolving methods and gadgets shown on TV. "Something like an electronic nose that can smell fragrances and make identifications doesn't exist," he says, "and it won't ever exist."

The use of science and technology to solve crimes and track down criminals appeals to many people. But, thanks in part to television's portrayal of these occupations, this interest is often misguided. "There is an enormous amount of interest generated by shows" about criminal investigation, says Moses Schanfield, chair of the forensic science department at George Washington University. "People say they want to be a forensic psychologist, but what they mean is a profiler, and there are only about four in the country." These same types of inquiries are directed to agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which explains on its Web site that the FBI does not have an occupation called "profiler."

Schanfield suggests that those interested in crime-scene and forensics occupations learn more about them by contacting the director of either a local crime lab or a local law enforcement agency's crime-scene investigations department.

Comprehensive employment, earnings, and training information is limited for these occupations; the Bureau of Labor Statistics does not have employment and earnings data on either crime-scene investigators or forensic scientists, specifically. Coverage of crime-scene technicians and criminal investigators, some of whose tasks may include those of crime-scene investigators, is included with that of police and detectives. Forensic science technicians, whose jobs may also include those of crime-scene technicians, numbered about 6,400 in 2000, with median annual earnings of \$41,040 in 2002. For more information about forensic scientists, see "Forensic scientists: A career in the crime lab" in the fall 1999 OOO, available online at www.bls.gov/opub/ooo/1999/fall/art01.pdf.



In real life, unlike on TV, attorneys spend most of their time outside of court.

Legal shows: Mixed verdict for reality

Legal dramas are replete with unrealistic representations of the daily work of lawyers, who also are called attorneys or counselors. While TV attorneys meet with clients and try cases in court, actual lawyers spend most of their time in offices poring over documents. “You never see lawyers on TV spending three days reading through legal cases,” says Thane Rosenbaum, a Fordham Law School professor who has written about the way lawyers are portrayed on TV. In real life, he says, “there’s a lot of minutiae done by lawyers, and an actual trial is incredibly rare.”

The exact nature of attorneys’ work varies. But real lawyers usually focus on either criminal or civil law, a distinction not always made on TV. In criminal law, attorneys represent either the people who have been accused of committing crime or the Federal, State, or local government that has filed the charges. In civil law, attorneys assist their clients in matters relating to individual

concerns, such as estate planning, contract enforcement, and adoption. Some lawyers, including those working on public-interest cases and those who are “in-house” counsel for corporations, might handle both types.

Whether practicing criminal or civil law, attorneys serve as both advisors and advocates for their clients. As advisors, lawyers inform clients of their legal rights and obligations and counsel them about business or personal issues that pertain to the law. “Lawyers spend a lot of time writing letters or briefs, filling out forms, and making phone calls,” says Rosenbaum. “There’s also document discovery—looking through piles and piles of documents, such as corporation files or financial statements—and legal research.” As advocates, lawyers may advocate on a client’s behalf outside of court or represent the client in courtroom proceedings or, less frequently, in a trial.

David Papke, a researcher and Marquette University Law School professor who has written extensively about the lawyers of prime time, says that most television lawyers are trial attorneys, which is an overrepresentation of the fewer than 10 percent of U.S. lawyers who are in

this category. “Some lawyers have never been in a courtroom or don’t even know where the courthouse is,” says Papke. “And even trial lawyers spend the majority of their time outside the courtroom, so the typical television image of a lawyer presenting a case before a judge or jury is not the prevailing reality for many people in this field.”

In spite of the way in which legal dramas skew their depiction of attorneys, TV law is not all bad. “At its [the justice system’s] core, it’s portrayed truthfully as opposed to accurately,” says Chuck Rosenberg, a consultant who has worked on popular legal dramas. Although not all of the details are realistic, he explains, these programs clearly show the justice system as an adversarial one.

Legal consultants like Rosenberg, or lawyers who are hired to write scripts, help to keep these shows closer to real life. Rosenberg says that his role as a technical consultant varies from show to show, writer to writer, and year to year. In many cases, he talks to the writers before they create the script, “helping writers mind reality for better drama.” When he reads scripts, Rosenberg says, he is concerned less with “pristine accuracy” and more with how realistically topics are dealt with, including balance in presenting both sides of a

TV law is not all bad. These programs clearly show the justice system as an adversarial one.

controversial issue. He also checks for accuracy of technical language, to ensure that the script sounds good from a lawyer’s perspective. “Sometimes my advice is taken,” he says, “and sometimes not.”

In 2000, there were 681,000 lawyers employed in the United States, with average job growth projected through 2010. Median annual earnings were \$90,290 in 2002—but, as is the case with physicians and surgeons, attorneys work long hours and may have to pay off student loans for many years.

Real-life lawyers must have a bachelor’s degree and a law degree, usually taking a combined 7 years of full-time study to complete. Given the rigorous study required, law as a career choice may lose its appeal for students who based their decision on TV shows. But Christine Corcos, a law professor at Louisiana State University, uses elements from some legal dramas as teaching tools in her classroom. “These shows are accurate to the extent they emphasize the need for knowledge of the law,” she says.

Among the lessons TV legal programs teach, says Corcos, are interactions among lawyers, police, and judges; interviews with witnesses; and negotiations between prosecution and defense. The best shows illustrate how cases are resolved in ways other than going to trial and, for those that go to trial, provide good models for trial practice and courtroom behavior.

Television’s potential role in enticing students to study law doesn’t bother Jim Elkins, law professor at West Virginia University and author published in the *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*. “I have no problem with the fact that people are drawn to mistaken images of law,” he says. “We want people to get stirred up—to find the law compelling, exciting, powerful—and TV does this.”

Reality check:

Career research outside the box

Television might introduce you to occupations and lead to further career exploration. But to get beyond the introductions, turn off the TV and tune into the real world.

Career resource specialists at your public library or your school’s career counseling center can direct you to reliable sources of occupational information. Among the most comprehensive resources available in most libraries and career centers is the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. The *Handbook* describes the nature of the work, working conditions, employment, training requirements, earnings, and outlook in more than 270 occupational statements—covering about 90 percent of the jobs in the economy. You also may visit the *Handbook* online at www.bls.gov/oco.

Another method of career research is the hands-on reality version of TV: job shadowing, informational interviewing, working in an internship, and talking to friends or relatives about their careers is an excellent way to gather insight about the occupations that interest you. Previous issues of the *Occupational Outlook Quarterly* contain articles on job shadowing (summer 1998) and informational interviewing (summer 2002, also available online at www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2002/summer/art03.pdf).

Finally, don’t forget to check past issues of the *Quarterly* for occupational- and job-related information. A 5-year index appears in every winter issue. In addition, online access includes a search engine and dates back to the spring 1999 issue. Set your browser to www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/ooqhome.htm.

