

The Downing Centre Courtroom Enters Your Lounge Room

By Sonia Hickey and Ugur Nedim

Fans of *Judge Judy* and dramas like *Boston Legal*, *Ally McBeal* and *LA Law* can now enjoy all the drama of real life court cases, straight from the courtrooms of the Downing Centre.

For the first time ever in Australia, crews have been given unprecedented access to all areas of Australia's busiest court complex to film an observational documentary series.

Producers were given time with magistrates, court staff, defendants and complainants, and several courtrooms were decked out with small fixed-rig cameras to capture the highs and lows of court proceedings.

The [10-part series, which is due to air on Foxtel later this year](#), gives viewers a front row seat to the legal process, including the way cases are run and how decisions are made.

Central to the series are the court's twelve magistrates, who are responsible for deciding the futures of tens of thousands of people every year.

Education and entertainment

Throughout the series, magistrates offer additional commentary to explain what's happening in the featured cases.

Each 30-minute episode follows two or three cases, from drink driving to drug possession, and assault to larceny.

Until recently, filming inside courtrooms was [severely restricted in New South Wales](#) and our legal system has been slow to adopt advances in technology, and new ways to give the community an insight into the operation of the courts.

This is different to countries like the United States, where the broadcasting of entire cases has been occurring for decades.

Concerns about such broadcasting revolves around the privacy of participants, security issues and the risk of bringing the legal system into disrepute by turning magistrates into celebrities and courtrooms into scenes of soap operas.

However, privacy concerns were addressed by inviting those filmed to sign release forms, and the benefits of providing the community with an understanding of the court system are seen as outweighing the risk of turning proceedings into a spectacle.

Positive impact of broadcasting

It is hoped the series will not only be educational, but act as a deterrent to would-be offenders.

The show also aims to shine a spotlight on social problems, and questions of ethics and morality that exist in our society – demonstrating that issues are not always black and white, or ‘easily clarified.’

Viewers are set to see for themselves that magistrates are not as ‘out of touch’ as radio shock jocks and tabloid newspapers would like the public to believe. Rather, each case calls for a range of factors to be taken into account, and magistrates are required to give reasons for their decisions.

As Judge Henson of the court explains: “Research shows that [confidence in the criminal justice system is higher](#) amongst people who understand how it works and this program will give the community an insight into how magistrates make their decisions.”

Indeed, those words are [backed up by studies](#) which have found that members of the public who are given all of the facts will

often hand-down [penalties equivalent to, or more lenient than](#), those delivered by magistrates and judges.

The series, which is called Court Justice: Sydney', was filmed over a six-week period last year and producers expect that it will be a big hit. If it meets expectations, it may ultimately be franchised.

Executive Producer for CJZ, Michael Cordell says: "Gaining television access to our courts is one of the last frontiers of observational filmmaking in Australia. We've seen a lot of police shows, ambulance shows and the like, but we rarely get a chance to observe what happens in our courts, which are critical to the way society functions."