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Alumni

How Dan Abrams Turned a Law Degree into a Media Empire — with a Twist

The legal analyst from TV and radio is turning his attention to wine and spirits.

By
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|
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“I think the key to success is knowing your strengths,” says Dan Abrams ’92LAW. “I was a decent law student. I would have been decent at practicing law. But I realized early on, that’s not what I’m great at. What I *am* great at is explaining the law in a way that anyone can understand.”

[Abrams](#) knows something about success. As a court reporter and legal analyst for Court TV, NBC, and ABC, he’s covered some of the most important trials of the last three decades. He’s hosted his own cable-news shows on MSNBC and NewsNation. He has a [podcast](#) on SiriusXM radio and is the author of [five best-selling books](#). And he’s the founder and owner of [Abrams Media](#), a group of websites focused on topics ranging from politics and the media to fine alcoholic spirits.

While Abrams’s career has been vast and varied, there is a through line to it. Nearly all of his jobs and ventures have relied on this singular ability to translate difficult concepts — especially those relating to the law — into common terms. “I approach my job the same way I would approach explaining a complicated Supreme Court case to my twelve-year-old son,” Abrams says. “It’s something I learned from my own dad.”

Abrams's father, [Floyd Abrams](#), who taught for many years at both Columbia Law School and Columbia Journalism School, is not just a lawyer but a legendary First Amendment litigator known for his high-profile cases. In 1971 he served as co-counsel to *The New York Times* on the [Pentagon Papers case](#). Later he would go on to argue thirteen cases in front of the Supreme Court and to represent notable clients such as then *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller '69BC during the grand-jury investigation of the 2003 Valerie Plame affair and Mitch McConnell in the *Citizens United* case.

The younger Abrams, who was a small child during the Pentagon Papers trial, remembers sharing the palpable excitement that his father brought home from the office. Instead of fairy tales, he and his sister Ronnie would get courtroom stories at bedtime. As they grew older, their father would use them to hone his oral arguments over the dinner table.

"Honestly, we loved it," Abrams says. "We always tried to get him to stay longer, to tell us more. When you have a parent who is passionate about what they do, I think it inevitably rubs off on you."

Abrams says that it was always clear that his sister, now a judge on the US District Court for the Southern District of New York, would go to law school and follow in her father's footsteps. But his own path was not as obvious. "For me, the early legal education was more like a stepping stone," Abrams says. "I didn't know exactly where it was going to take me."

Initially it took him to Duke University, where he earned his bachelor's degree. "After spending my whole childhood in Manhattan, I think I was just looking for something different," he says. He studied political science and was a news anchor for the campus television station, where he says his most notable assignment was covering a visit by then president Ronald Reagan. "I was really into it," he says. "I wasn't 100 percent sure about going to law school, and I think that even then there was a nagging feeling that I wanted to go into broadcast journalism."

After graduating, Abrams took a year off to travel and surf with friends. Despite his initial hesitation, he also used the time to apply to law school. He ended up at Columbia, where he says he was particularly influenced by Henry Monaghan's constitutional-law class, Jane Ginsburg's copyright-law class, and, fittingly, Vince Blasi's course on media and the law.

When Abrams was in his second year at Columbia, the cable-news station Court TV launched, with live coverage of trials interspersed with analysis from legal experts. “I thought, wow, that’s the perfect combination of things that I’m interested in,” he says. Abrams was on his way to a conventional legal career: he was a summer associate at the New York law firm Willkie Farr & Gallagher, and they offered him a full-time job. But he couldn’t shake the idea of working for Court TV. He approached Willkie about his predicament, and they agreed to hold his offer for a year.

“It was a critical backstop,” Abrams says. “Without that safety net, I’m not sure I would have jumped.”

Abrams started at Court TV as a production assistant in 1992 — “and yes, that meant giving up big-law money to make almost no money at all.” Because the station was so new, the staff was small, which meant that Abrams had a lot of opportunities to get his hands dirty. “I would go in to the office in the middle of the night and practice reading the teleprompter.”

After a year and a half, Abrams was promoted to reporter. Just a few months later, O. J. Simpson was arrested for the murder of his ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ron Goldman, and Abrams — the most junior of the three reporters at Court TV — was asked to cover the trial. “The other two reporters were already on assignment, so they sent me,” Abrams says. “And suddenly I was in the middle of the most important news story in America.”

Abrams stayed in Los Angeles for nine months, reporting on one of the twentieth century’s most sensational trials. It was one of the first trials in which cameras were allowed in the courtroom, so it was a novelty to be able to watch the event live, and CNN and Court TV were the only two stations carrying the proceedings from beginning to end.

“I was in over my head,” Abrams says. “People were coming to me to make sense of the legal issues, and I was two years out of law school. I had never been in a courtroom before.”

But while Abrams didn’t know all the answers himself, he knew the right questions to ask, and he knew where to get the answers. Those skills became the building blocks of his career. When the Simpson trial ended, more high-profile assignments followed — from the trial of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh to that of assisted-suicide doctor Jack Kevorkian. In 1997, Abrams was approached by NBC News. The

network was looking for someone with courtroom experience to join the *Today* show as a legal analyst. Abrams did that for two years, then moved to general-assignment reporting.

“I was covering plane crashes, hurricanes, all kinds of stories,” Abrams says. “It was exciting, but it also made me realize that my real passion wasn’t reporting but analysis.”

In 2001, Abrams moved within the NBC family to MSNBC for what he calls his dream job: hosting his own legal-affairs show. *The Abrams Report* ran nightly for nearly five years, focusing on news stories with a legal bent. Though Abrams says he loved every minute of it, by the end he was itching for another challenge. He wanted to manage the business.

He created a ten-page presentation on what he saw as the future of MSNBC and why he should run the channel. Eventually, he was given the chance, taking over as MSNBC’s general manager in 2006. While he enjoyed being able to make decisions and execute his vision for a major organization, Abrams felt hampered by the large corporate structure. “MSNBC reports to NBC, so I had no real autonomy,” he says. “I was effectively an HR manager.”

Abrams left the managerial role the following year and went back on the air, hosting *Verdict with Dan Abrams* until 2008. But ironically, decisions he had made as manager came back to bite him. With the rise of right-wing media in the early aughts, Abrams had begun pushing MSNBC to move further to the left to provide cable-news viewers with an alternative perspective. But while he says that was the right move for MSNBC, his own personal analysis was much more politically moderate.

“My show was no longer the right fit for the station,” he says.

MSNBC gave his nightly 9 p.m. slot to Rachel Maddow. And while they offered him a daytime slot, he felt that it was time to start something of his own. Abrams stayed on with NBC as a legal analyst. But in 2009 he started gearing up to launch Abrams Media, a group of websites covering a range of topics.

“I wanted to create something from scratch,” Abrams says. “I wanted to be able to make changes, to be nimble, to pivot without checking with a ton of people.”

During his tenure as a cable-news host, Abrams had started to realize how interested viewers were in the world of media itself, and how influential media personalities had become — “in many cases, more influential than the politicians themselves.” With that in mind, he launched [Mediaite](#), a website that uses media as a prism through which to understand politics. Or, as he calls it, a blog “for the media, about the media, and part of the new media.”

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With the success of Mediaite, which took off during the first Trump administration and eventually peaked at eighty-four million monthly visitors during the 2024 election, Abrams began to create other Web properties. Over the last fifteen years, he has launched more than a dozen sites, four of which he has since sold. Some, like [Law&Crime](#) — a legal-news site that livestreams interesting trials — are clearly in Abrams’s wheelhouse. But he has also taken the opportunity to explore new topics, like sports, women in gaming, and celebrity gossip.

“I did things on the cheap so I’d be able to test ideas out and see what had legs,” he says.

In 2020, Abrams, a bourbon drinker, noticed that there was no reliable site or app that aggregated reviews of spirits. So he launched Whiskey Raiders, a website and companion app that use a proprietary algorithm to rate whiskeys based on credible sources across the Internet. Users can scan a bottle and pull up ratings and reviews, as well as read original content about spirits. Two years later, he added Gin Raiders, Tequila Raiders, and Rum Raiders, uniting them under the umbrella company [Bottle Raiders](#). Using his news site [Law&Crime](#) — which he sold in 2023 in what he calls a “monster deal” — as a model, Abrams plans for Bottle Raiders to be a multi-platform business with a major YouTube and social-media presence.

“The businesses that have done best have tended to be the ones where I’m personally passionate about the subject matter,” Abrams says. “That’s certainly true of Bottle Raiders.”

As he’s built his media company, Abrams has kept busy — very busy — with a host of other professional commitments. In 2017, the writer David Fisher approached Abrams with an idea for a book. He had recently learned about a transcript of Abraham Lincoln’s last murder trial, which took place nine months before Lincoln

accepted the nomination for president. The transcript had been discovered in 1989, and miraculously no one had written a book about it. Fisher and Abrams published *Lincoln's Last Trial: The Murder Case That Propelled Him to the Presidency* in 2018. It became a *New York Times* bestseller.

Since their first book, the pair has released three more bestsellers, all focusing on forgotten trials in history. *Theodore Roosevelt for the Defense*, published in 2019, follows the libel suit that could have forever marred the former president's legacy. *John Adams Under Fire*, which came out the following year, tracks the Founding Father's role in the Boston Massacre murder trial. And finally, *Kennedy's Avenger* tells the story of Jack Ruby, who shot and killed Kennedy assassin Lee Harvey Oswald.

"I think the thing that makes our books distinct is the reliance on the trial transcripts," Abrams says. "People might know the outlines of the stories, but reading the actual words spoken in court makes that history come alive."



Miles Anthony Bouckoms

In addition to his writing career, Abrams has stayed active as a broadcast journalist. In 2011, he left his freelance gig at NBC for ABC, where he has spent the last fourteen years as chief legal analyst. He hosts *The Dan Abrams Show*, a daily radio

show and weekly podcast on SiriusXM's POTUS Politics channel. On Friday and Saturday nights, he hosts [On Patrol: Live](#), a TV docuseries on Reelz that follows camera crews on ride-alongs with various law-enforcement agencies across the country. And from 2021 through February of this year, Abrams hosted [Dan Abrams Live](#), a nightly news show on the cable network NewsNation.

Giving up that show was a difficult professional and personal decision. "No one willingly gives up a prime-time cable-news show," Abrams says. "It's the best job in the world."

But with his very full plate, he felt that it was time to focus more of his attention on Abrams Media and on other passion projects — particularly ones that allow him to spend more time at home, like the vineyard he recently bought on the North Fork of Long Island, named [Ev&Em](#) after his two children, Everett and Emilia.

Over twenty years ago, when Abrams was in his late thirties, he survived a bout with testicular cancer. He was in the prime of his career, and he initially told almost no one, determined not to let it — or anything — slow him down: "I just wanted to deal with it and move on." Abrams did eventually go public with his diagnosis, in the hopes of helping to spread awareness about the disease.

While Abrams says he never wanted the cancer diagnosis to define him, and it hasn't, it has helped to make him more mindful of keeping his priorities in check — both professionally and personally.

"I was recently talking to a friend in his eighties, someone very wealthy and successful. He told me that the one regret he had was that he was so focused on success, he didn't enjoy his life more," Abrams says. "I'm committed to not regretting anything."

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