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Mediating justice through live courtroom broadcast: a phenomenological study of journalist lived experiences in Indonesian television

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Live courtroom broadcasts have extended the principle of open justice into the mediated public sphere in Indonesia. Journalists from TV One function as communicative intermediaries who translate complex legal proceedings into accessible narratives for wider audiences. This study employs a phenomenological approach to explore journalists' lived experiences in covering high-profile trials. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews with six journalists and observation of live broadcast production. The data were analyzed using a descriptive phenomenological method based on Colaizzi's analytical procedure, allowing the identification of significant statements, formulation of meanings, and construction of thematic structures representing journalists' lived experiences. Findings reveal tensions between the goals of legal education and the dramaturgical demands of live courtroom broadcasting. The study conceptualizes courtroom journalism as a form of mediating justice, where journalists translate legal processes into accessible public knowledge and shape public understanding of law in the Global South.

KEYWORDS

courtroom journalism, live courtroom broadcast, legal communication, mediating justice, Indonesia

1 Introduction

Open court hearings constitute a fundamental principle in modern judicial systems aimed at ensuring accountability and transparency (Johnston, 2018). In the media era, this principle is increasingly realized through courtroom coverage by the press, including live broadcasts on television. Since the mid-2010s, particularly following widely publicized cases such as the 2016 Jessica Kumala Wongso trial, live courtroom broadcasting has become increasingly prominent in Indonesia. In this context, TV One has emerged as one of the leading television networks consistently broadcasting high-profile court proceedings live, positioning itself as a key actor in shaping public access to judicial processes. TV One operates as a news-oriented commercial television network within Indonesia's competitive media ecosystem, with a strong emphasis on political and legal coverage. Unlike general entertainment-based broadcasters, TV One positions itself as a channel that prioritizes real-time news, including live courtroom

proceedings. This study selects TV One as a critical case due to its consistent involvement in broadcasting high-profile trials. Rather than representing the entire Indonesian media landscape, TV One is treated as an information-rich case that provides in-depth insight into the communicative practices of courtroom journalism.

This phenomenon of “trial by television” has generated expectations that media can serve as an instrument for public legal education (Ravid, 2017). The mass media carries an educational function alongside its informational and entertainment roles, as mandated by the Press Law No. 40/1999. Courtroom journalism is therefore regarded as a manifestation of that educational function by making judicial processes more accessible to the public (Ardilla et al., 2020; Johnston, 2018). This study positions courtroom journalism as a form of mediating justice, in which journalists act as communicative bridges translating legal processes into public understanding. However, existing studies have largely focused on normative debates about courtroom transparency and media effects, while limited attention has been given to how justice is mediated through everyday journalistic practices, particularly in live courtroom broadcasting contexts.

Journalists covering trials act as legal communicators (Rieke and Stutman, 2022; Widodo, 2024), translating complex legal language and procedures into information that can be easily understood by general audiences (Bryan and Kromphardt, 2016; Magin and Maurer, 2019). Through live broadcasts, journalists bridge the highly technical legal world with the public’s need for comprehensible legal information (Ravid, 2017).

However, concerns arise that the process of mediating justice through live broadcasting may shift from educational communication toward dramatized representation, potentially affecting how justice is understood by the public (Fox et al., 2001; Ravid, 2017). Court coverage risks presenting legal events as dramatic spectacles, highlighting courtroom confrontations, emotional expressions of defendants and witnesses, and speculative commentary, all of which can enhance the dramatic tone of the broadcast (Ravid, 2017). The dilemma between educational value and dramatization has sparked debate among both media practitioners and academic scholars. Studies suggest that the media often selects sensational criminal cases for live broadcast to increase audience appeal, potentially creating an unbalanced portrayal that undermines the legal educational function. As a result, televised trials may disrupt the presumption of innocence and influence public opinion before a verdict is reached (Habsari, 2017; Manan, 2015).

In addition to these concerns, courtroom communication can also be understood as a performative process. From a dramaturgical perspective (Goffman, 1959), social interactions are structured as performances in which actors present themselves before an audience within specific settings. This perspective provides a useful lens for understanding how courtroom actors and journalists construct and communicate representations of justice in live broadcast contexts. In this study, journalistic idealism refers to a normative orientation in which journalists perceive their professional role as serving the public interest through truth-telling, public education, and accountability. This idealism is grounded in core journalistic values such as objectivity, independence, and social

responsibility (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017; Schudson and Anderson, 2009). This idealism plays a central role in shaping how journalists mediate justice in live courtroom broadcasting, influencing how legal processes are interpreted and communicated to the public.

The widely publicized 2016 “cyanide coffee” case involving Jessica Kumala Wongso, for instance, was broadcast intensively and triggered trial by media, shaping public opinion even before the court’s decision (Suryawati, 2017). This example highlights growing criticisms that the dramatization of court proceedings by the media may erode substantive justice (Ravid, 2017).

For journalists engaged in covering live courtroom proceedings, maintaining a balance between educational goals and entertainment elements becomes a distinct challenge. They are required to provide accurate information about legal processes, such as the reading of indictments and the presentation of evidence or legal arguments, while ensuring the broadcast remains engaging enough to retain audience attention. Consequently, journalists develop specific communication strategies to bridge legal language with public understanding. These strategies include using simplified vocabulary or lay equivalents for legal terminology, offering contextual explanations about courtroom procedures, and featuring expert legal commentators as supporting communicators who help unpack technical legal concepts (Bryan and Kromphardt, 2016). Through such strategies, journalists aim to maintain the accuracy of legal substance without compromising the audience’s ability to understand the information being conveyed (Stern, 2014). In addition, interactions with court public relations officers are utilized to obtain correct information about the proceedings, ensuring that the information broadcast remains accurate and compliant with legal norms (Ardilla et al., 2020). From the perspective of professionalism and idealism, courtroom journalism demands a high level of ethical commitment. Journalists must adhere to professional codes of ethics, including accuracy, balance, and respect for the presumption of innocence, even under pressure from rating expectations and sensational demands (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2018; Schudson and Anderson, 2009).

Idealistic journalists view courtroom reporting as a noble mission to enlighten the public about legal processes and reinforce public accountability (Johnston, 2018; Jones, 2021). They believe that transparent and informative trial coverage allows the media to contribute to judicial oversight and public access to justice (Johnston, 2018; Wittchen, 2023). Yet such idealism is often tested by practical realities, including limited airtime, the pressure to produce “dramatic moments,” and legal risks such as allegations of contempt of court or defamation when coverage is deemed excessive (Ardilla et al., 2020; Habsari, 2017; Huang, 2021). It is therefore important to understand how journalists reflect on their professionalism and idealism when broadcasting trials live, including the values they uphold and negotiate when idealism intersects with the pragmatism of the media industry.

Conceptually, this study is informed by three interrelated bodies of scholarship: (1) the principle of open justice and the mediatization of courts, which frame courtroom journalism as a channel through which judicial transparency is extended into the public sphere; (2) role performance and civic journalism perspectives, which emphasize journalists’ normative functions as watchdogs, educators, and mediators of public interest; and (3)

research on media events and “trial by media,” which highlights the dramaturgical and affective dimensions of televised legal proceedings. While prior studies have examined televised trials and courtroom reporting in various jurisdictions, much of the literature focuses on legal implications, audience effects, or content analysis, with comparatively less attention to the lived experiences of journalists, especially in Global South contexts.

Based on the above background, this study asks: How do TV One journalists experience live courtroom broadcasting as a means of legal education and a form of mediating justice? Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do TV One journalists understand and enact their roles as legal communicators in live courtroom broadcasts?

RQ2: How do they experience and negotiate the tension between educational goals and dramatization imperatives?

RQ3: What communication strategies do they employ to bridge legal language and lay audiences?

RQ4: How do they reflect on professionalism and journalistic idealism in the practice of live broadcasting?

This study is significant because in Indonesia there is limited in-depth research on courtroom journalism, even though the phenomenon is increasingly relevant alongside the expansion of judicial transparency in the digital era. Using a phenomenological approach, this research explores the subjective experiences of journalists, thereby offering new perspectives on courtroom journalism as a form of public communication in the legal domain and contributing empirical insight from a Global South media system to broader debates on media, law, and democracy.

2 Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a phenomenological method to explore the lived experiences of television journalists involved in broadcasting court proceedings live. The study aims to capture how journalists experience and interpret their role in mediating justice through communicative practices. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it is suitable for understanding the meaning of informants' subjective experiences regarding a particular phenomenon (Sturges, 2018).

TV One was chosen as a critical case due to its consistent and intensive involvement in broadcasting high-profile courtroom proceedings in Indonesia. This study adopts a critical case sampling strategy, where TV One is selected not as a representative of all Indonesian media, but as an information-rich case that provides deep insight into live courtroom journalism practices. Compared to other national broadcasters, TV One demonstrates a stronger editorial commitment to continuous live trial coverage, making it particularly relevant for examining real-time legal communication processes. Therefore, the selection of TV One is based on its depth of engagement with courtroom broadcasting rather than its representativeness of the broader media landscape.

2.1 Informants and data collection procedures

The research informants consisted of six TV One journalists with a minimum of five years of experience covering major

court proceedings live. Informants were selected purposively based on the following criteria: prior involvement as field reporters or studio presenters in live broadcasts of high-profile trials such as corruption cases or nationally significant criminal cases, and willingness to reflect on their professional experiences. This sample size is consistent with phenomenological research, in which a relatively small number of participants is considered adequate to achieve depth and richness of lived experience, rather than statistical representativeness. Most informants served as field reporters covering trials at court locations, while several also worked as studio presenters during live broadcasts. Before the interviews, all informants agreed to participate with a guarantee of confidentiality. For the purposes of this study, informants' identities were anonymized using labels R1 through R6. This study focuses specifically on journalists as primary informants because they are directly involved in real-time processes of translating, framing, and communicating courtroom events to the public. While editors, producers, and news directors play important roles in shaping newsroom output, their involvement operates at a different organizational level and would require a broader analytical scope. Therefore, their exclusion is intentional and aligned with the phenomenological focus of this study on lived experience. This limitation is acknowledged, and future research is recommended to include other newsroom actors in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of courtroom journalism practices.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted via synchronous online interaction using the Zoom platform, allowing direct engagement, probing, and clarification of participants' lived experiences. This real-time interaction ensured that the interviews retained the characteristics of direct qualitative inquiry despite being conducted in a mediated environment. The interviews focused on four themes: the role of journalists as legal communicators, dilemmas between education and dramatization in reporting, strategies used to bridge legal language for public understanding, and personal reflections on idealism and professionalism during live trial coverage. Interview questions were designed to elicit concrete examples, emotional responses, and perspectives related to each theme. Examples include “Can you describe an experience where you had to explain a difficult legal term during a live broadcast?” or “What internal conflict have you experienced between presenting the trial as it is versus pressure to make the broadcast engaging?” All interviews were audio-recorded with informants' consent and were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

In addition to interviews, participatory observation was conducted to enrich contextual understanding. The researcher accompanied the TV One team during coverage of a nationally significant corruption trial broadcast live in early 2025. The researcher observed journalists' working dynamics in the courtroom and in the media center, their interactions with sources such as prosecutors, defense lawyers, and court public relations officers, and the coordination processes with the studio during broadcasts. Field notes from these observations contributed to a deeper understanding of the situation and the time pressures faced by journalists, enabling more contextual interpretation of interview data.

The researcher occupied a position as an informed outsider: familiar with media and legal communication issues through academic work but not part of TV One's newsroom. This positionality required reflexivity in order to avoid imposing normative assumptions about "how the media should behave" and to remain open to journalists' own sense-making. Throughout the research process, the researcher maintained a reflective journal to monitor potential biases and their influence on data interpretation.

2.2 Data analysis

After collecting the data, the researcher transcribed all interviews and analyzed them using a descriptive phenomenological technique based on the simplified steps of Colaizzi (Neubauer et al., 2019). *First*, the researcher repeatedly read the entire set of transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding. *Second*, the researcher identified statements most relevant to the four research foci. *Third*, thematic formulations were generated from these statements by interpreting them within the context of each informant's experience. *Fourth*, the emerging themes were grouped into categories that reflected shared aspects of experience.

At this stage, the researcher identified four major themes consistent with the initial focus of the study, namely, journalists as legal communicators, dilemmas between education and dramatization, strategies for bridging legal concepts with public understanding, and professionalism vs. journalistic idealism. Each theme was supported by subthemes or illustrative examples from the informants. Fifth, the researcher developed an essential description of the phenomenon based on these themes, representing the collective experiences of TV One journalists in practicing live courtroom journalism. Sixth, validation was carried out through informal member checking, where the researcher presented a summary of findings to several informants to ensure accuracy and avoid misinterpretation. The informants confirmed the relevance of the findings to their experiences and offered minor input which was incorporated accordingly.

Throughout the analysis, the researcher applied bracketing by suspending personal biases and assumptions to prevent them from influencing interpretation (Neubauer et al., 2019; Sturgess, 2018). For instance, the researcher set aside normative assumptions such as "the media should not be sensational" to remain open to journalists' perspectives. This step was important to maintain the purity of phenomenological description. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing interview data among informants and linking them with observational findings, thereby strengthening the credibility of the results. In addition, peer debriefing with two communication scholars was conducted to discuss the emerging themes and their interpretation, ensuring consistency between data and analysis.

2.3 Credibility and ethics

This study obtained ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of Tidar University. The application was submitted

to this institution due to the absence of formal ethical review mechanisms within the authors' affiliated institution. Ethically, this study obtained permission from TV One's editorial management to interview its journalists and to observe live broadcast production routines. Informants were free to decline answering sensitive questions and could withdraw from the interview at any time. Confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms for all informants and by omitting any details that could lead to personal identification. The study followed general ethical principles in qualitative research, including respect for autonomy, confidentiality, and minimization of harm.

3 Finding

3.1 Journalists as legal communicators for the public

The informants acknowledged their central role as conveyors of legal information from the courtroom to the wider public. They recognized that many viewers are unfamiliar with legal terminology and procedures, thus journalists act as "translators" who convert legal language into public language. A field reporter (R1) explained,

"During the hearing, the judge may use terms like 'the objection is rejected because the indictment is considered precise.' I have to explain on-air that an 'objection' is a kind of protest note submitted by the defendant's legal counsel, and that if it is rejected, the trial continues to the main case." This statement illustrates the journalist's effort to simplify legal jargon without reducing the substantive meaning.

All journalists admitted preparing materials before broadcasting by reviewing publicly available case information, consulting legal experts, and analyzing trial-related materials from accessible media and official sources. This preparation enabled them to understand the legal issues that arise during the trial and communicate them effectively to audiences in simplified language.

Informants also felt responsible for maintaining the accuracy of legal information. They tried to provide context for each development in the trial, such as explaining the function of each stage of the process (indictment reading, witness examination, prosecution, defense plea) in a structured manner. A studio presenter (R3) stated:

"I consider the viewers as laypeople who need a complete picture. So in every segment, I summarize: today the court agenda is the examination of a forensic expert witness, aiming to establish the cause of the victim's death."

This approach helps viewers understand the logic and flow of the trial rather than seeing only fragmented events. The journalists agreed that by explaining legal background and technical terms, the public can follow the proceedings with greater clarity. This aligns with their ideal that the media must contribute to

improving public legal literacy. A senior reporter (R2) expressed a similar view:

“If ordinary people understand what an indictment is, or the difference between factual witnesses and expert witnesses, it means our work succeeded in mediating legal language for the people.”

These findings affirm that courtroom journalists act as mediators of justice, translating legal processes into accessible public narratives that shape how justice is understood by audiences. This indicates that mediating justice operates through communicative translation, where journalists actively reconstruct legal meaning for public consumption.

3.2 The dilemma between education and dramatization in live broadcasts

This theme strongly emerged from all informants' experiences. They faced a two-directional pressure: on one hand, ideally, courtroom broadcasts should be treated as purely informative and educational news coverage; on the other hand, the live television format demands dramatic elements to attract viewers. Field reporters R1 and R4 revealed that production teams often instructed them to highlight emotional or confrontational moments in the courtroom.

“A producer once said, ‘if there’s tension between the judge and the lawyer, report it immediately, that’s a good moment!’,” R4 explained.

As a result, reporters often found themselves in a dilemma. When trials proceed monotonously (such as long document readings), there is a temptation to embellish reports with opinions or speculation to avoid boring the audience. However, journalists also understood that excessive dramatization could obscure legal substance and unfairly influence public opinion. R2 admitted having been reprimanded by an editor for unintentionally dramatizing a defendant's reaction:

“I once said ‘Defendant X looked panicked and repeatedly wiped sweat...’. The editor was angry because we are not infotainment. Since then, I’ve been more careful, only reporting facts without dramatic additions.”

Nevertheless, some informants acknowledged that dramaturgy cannot be entirely avoided. Certain courtroom situations are inherently dramatic, such as the victim's family weeping hysterically or heated debates between defense lawyers and prosecutors. These moments naturally become the focus of camera attention. The dilemma lies in editorial decisions regarding how far journalists should exploit such emotions. R3 explained:

“I have to choose words carefully: if a witness cries, I report the fact ‘the witness cried while recalling the events,’ without exaggerating it with sensational wording.”

This reflects an effort to maintain balance. Journalists still report dramatic elements because they are part of the event, but refrain from excessive sensationalism.

Several journalists also acknowledged the presence of rating pressure. The success of a live courtroom program is partly judged by audience ratings, which implicitly encourages production teams to look for dramatic angles. Field journalists often found themselves at a crossroads between adhering to journalistic ideals that emphasize information and education or following commercial pressures for sensationalism.

“Honestly, as a journalist I want to educate the public. But sometimes the boss asks for an angle with a ‘wow factor’. This is our inner struggle in every major trial,” said R6.

Overall, this dilemma reflects the core tension in mediating justice, where journalists must balance the responsibility of conveying accurate legal information with the need to present courtroom events in a publicly engaging manner.

3.3 Strategies for bridging legal language with public understanding

The study identified several communication strategies that journalists use to ensure that trial information is easily understood by the general audience.

The first strategy is simplification of legal terminology. As mentioned previously, journalists replace legal terms with everyday equivalents or provide brief on-air definitions. For example, “interlocutory decision” is explained as “a temporary decision issued in the middle of the trial,” or “criminal execution” is described by reporters as “the implementation of punishment for a convicted person.”

The second strategy is contextual elaboration. Journalists not only report what happens in the courtroom but also provide background information about the case and its legal relevance. This resembles a news feature style, in which reporters insert historical context or case chronology during breaks in the trial. R1 gave an example: during a corruption trial, “While waiting for the judges to deliberate, I reminded viewers: this case began with a sting operation last year involving an official from Ministry X, causing a state financial loss of...” This strategy helps viewers understand the context of each stage of the trial.

The third strategy is the use of expert sources. In several broadcasts, TV One invited legal scholars or experts as analysts in the studio. Journalists moderated discussions with these experts to clarify technical aspects. For instance, when there was debate over the legal articles in the indictment, the presenter would ask, “What does this article mean, and why do the prosecutor and defense interpret it differently?” The expert's explanation helped clarify matters for viewers. R3 stated that experts were very helpful:

“My language has limitations. With an expert present, technical terms like ‘elements of an offense’ can be explained thoroughly without fear of error.”

Expert presence also enhances credibility and analytical depth.

The fourth strategy involves visualization and graphics. The production team prepares supporting visuals such as infographics showing trial procedures, diagrams of relationships among actors in the case, or highlighted points of the indictment. Journalists use these visuals while explaining the case, giving audiences a visual reference. Research observation noted that, during complex trials, TV One displayed a timeline of the case on the screen while reporters explained each stage accordingly. This technique helps viewers understand lengthy legal processes.

Fifth, journalists maintain a communicative tone and language style. They avoid rigid or overly formal reporting and instead adopt a conversational tone, as if explaining to a friend. R2 noted:

“I always imagine explaining things to my mother at home. So I choose simple words, use a friendly tone, and avoid sounding preachy.”

This humanistic approach makes viewers feel included in a conversation rather than lectured, thereby increasing their understanding. These strategies demonstrate how mediating justice is practically enacted through communicative techniques that simplify, contextualize, and interpret legal processes for public audiences. Through these strategies, journalists do not merely report events but actively shape the public's comprehension of legal processes.

3.4 Reflections on professionalism and journalistic idealism in live broadcasts

The informants reflected on the values they uphold and the conflicts they experience between idealism and practical demands. Generally, all journalists emphasized their commitment to objectivity and accuracy. They understood that the fate of a defendant is at stake in the courtroom, so reporting must not be biased or prejudicial.

“We are not judges, so we must remain balanced. I always insert the phrase ‘allegedly’ to remind viewers that no verdict has been issued,” said R4.

This shows adherence to the principle of presumption of innocence. Several journalists admitted having been contacted by defense lawyers or court public relations officers when objections arose concerning their reports. R2 recounted:

“Once the legal counsel protested because we referred to their client as a ‘corruptor.’ In fact, the person was only a defendant. We acknowledged the mistake and corrected it. That was a lesson on caution.”

Such experiences strengthened their professional discipline regarding the use of precise and neutral terminology.

From an idealistic perspective, the TV One journalists expressed pride that their work helps the public gain a better

understanding of the law. Many saw themselves as journalists with an educator idealism. R5 stated,

“I entered journalism because I wanted to be a watchdog. Covering trials is part of social control so the law remains transparent. There is personal satisfaction when my coverage helps people understand the law and monitor justice.”

This reflects that mediating justice is not only a professional obligation but also a moral commitment, where journalists perceive their role as contributing to public understanding and oversight of legal processes. Thus, mediating justice is experienced not only as a technical reporting activity but as a meaningful and value-driven communicative practice.

However, their idealism is not free from real-world constraints. Time pressure and speed often made it difficult for journalists to achieve ideal-quality reporting. During a trial, reporters must multitask: listening to courtroom testimony, taking notes, and preparing for live reporting simultaneously. Under such conditions, R3 admitted having once failed to cross-check a piece of information before broadcasting due to time pressure.

“There was a moment I mistakenly mentioned the prosecutor's name, and the presenter corrected me immediately. I was very embarrassed, but it reminded me that accuracy is number one.”

This highlights the challenge of maintaining professionalism under time constraints.

Organizational interests also sometimes played a role. When a trial involved a prominent political figure, editorial attention was heightened. R6 diplomatically noted,

“We are certainly independent, but the editorial team has certain considerations regarding the reporting angle, especially when it concerns a public figure.”

Although not elaborated, this implies that journalists sometimes negotiate between idealism of independence and the media organization's agenda-setting dynamics. Nevertheless, journalists expressed their determination to preserve the integrity of their reporting despite external pressures.

Another reflection pertains to personal qualities they developed through courtroom journalism. Covering lengthy trials trained journalists in patience and diligence. R2 noted,

“I used to get bored easily. After covering long trials, I learned to be patient and focused. If you lose concentration even for a moment, you might miss important facts.”

They also gained legal knowledge over time, which enhanced their competence as specialized legal journalists. Ultimately, the informants agreed that despite ethical dilemmas, time pressure, and industry demands, they found meaning in their work. “It is a demanding but noble job,” said R1, “We serve as information bridges. As long as we uphold ethics and quality, I believe we

contribute positively to society and the justice system.” These reflections affirm that the idealism of TV One’s courtroom journalists remains intact, coexisting with the professionalism they continually refine amid practical challenges.

4 Discussion

The findings of this study enrich our understanding of courtroom journalism as a form of communication practice in the legal sphere. In general, the experiences of TV One journalists reaffirm the role of the press as a mediator of justice, namely a medium that brings judicial processes before the public, thereby expanding the principle of open justice through broadcast channels (Bosland and Townend, 2018; Johnston, 2018; Papandrea, 2012). This study conceptualizes mediating justice as a communicative process through which journalists translate, frame, and represent legal proceedings in ways that shape public understanding of justice. This is in line with international literature that views court journalism as essential in a democracy because it provides citizens with access to “witness” the enforcement of the law and to assess whether the process is fair (Johnston, 2018; Jones, 2021, 2025). By foregrounding journalists’ lived experiences, this study moves beyond normative debates about whether trials should be televised and instead examines how justice is communicated and mediated through everyday journalistic practices.

The journalists in this study act as agents of mediating justice by translating legal language and procedures into formats that can be understood by laypeople. This confirms the position of journalists as public legal communicators, as argued by Magin and Maurer (2019), who state that court beat reporting requires specific competencies to bridge the worlds of law and society thereby reinforcing their role in shaping public understanding of legal processes (Magin and Maurer, 2019). In this sense, journalists function as communicative intermediaries who transform institutional legal discourse into accessible public narratives, thereby shaping how justice is understood and interpreted by audiences.

The ability of the informants to translate legal jargon is consistent with practical guidelines on legal journalism in many countries, where court reporters are expected to understand legal terminology so that they can explain it accurately to the public. In this way, journalists function as a kind of informal “teacher” for society on matters of legal literacy. This educational contribution is important, given that public legal awareness is often low; the mass media can serve as a vehicle for improving legal literacy (Sevignani, 2022).

On the other hand, the findings also highlight the dilemma of education vs. dramatization faced by journalists. The informants experience a pull between their idealism to present trials as they are in an informative manner and the pragmatism of the industry that demands dramatic elements to make broadcasts attractive. This tension illustrates the complexity of mediating justice, where journalists must balance accurate legal communication with the need to present courtroom events in an understandable and engaging manner. This dilemma parallels the findings of Ravid (2017), who notes that the television

format often pushes for sensational material, thereby reducing the educational potential of coverage (Ravid, 2017).

At this point, the phenomenon can be further interpreted through Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective, where courtroom proceedings—once mediated through live broadcasting—take on the characteristics of staged performances for public audiences. Wittchen (2023) further shows that in sensational crime reporting, journalists face ethical challenges in maintaining objectivity amid pressure to exploit emotional aspects (Wittchen, 2023). From a dramaturgical perspective, these moments represent the *performative dimension of mediating justice*, where courtroom events are publicly represented and interpreted through media narratives.

This study finds that TV One journalists try to balance these demands as part of their effort in mediating justice, ensuring that legal processes remain accurately represented while still accessible to the public. From a dramaturgical perspective, these moments represent “front-stage” expressions of legal drama, where emotional displays and courtroom interactions become visible to the public as part of a mediated performance of justice. This attitude demonstrates internalization of journalistic ethics and aligns with the ideal of objectivity, which continues to be upheld as a foundational norm (Schudson and Anderson, 2009).

The journalists are aware of the dangers of falling into sensationalism: the public may gain a distorted picture of legal processes, and public trust in the judiciary may be negatively affected as misrepresentation may distort how justice is publicly understood (Ravid, 2017). Ardilla et al. (2020) also highlight that uncontrolled live broadcasts of trials can violate the presumption of innocence and affect the evidentiary process in court (Ardilla et al., 2020). This highlights the tension between visibility and responsibility, where increased public access through media exposure simultaneously amplifies both transparency and the risk of misrepresentation. Therefore, journalists’ efforts to maintain neutral language and avoid judgment in their reporting deserve appreciation as a form of professional responsibility. This phenomenon of “keeping distance” from dramatization is consistent with the concept of strategic ritual to maintain objectivity, where journalists consciously avoid excessive interpretation and adhere strictly to facts (Wittchen, 2023).

At the same time, this study confirms that dramatic elements are inherently part of trials as media events. High-profile cases often stir public emotions, and the media functions as a stage on which legal drama is watched by the masses (Greer and McLaughlin, 2011). From Goffman’s perspective, the courtroom becomes a hybrid space in which institutional authority intersects with performative visibility. Legal actors perform roles before both immediate courtroom participants and a broader mediated audience, while journalists function as interpreters who frame this performance into coherent narratives. Meanwhile, critical processes such as judicial deliberation remain in the “backstage,” invisible yet central to the production of justice.

In this context, journalists are in a difficult position, making it necessary to maintain a balance between informing and engaging as part of their role in mediating justice: they must report human-interest aspects (which are often dramatic) but must not descend into cheap infotainment, making it necessary to maintain a balance between “informing” and “entertaining” in courtroom

news (Masduki, 2017). The findings of this study show that journalists attempt to walk this tightrope reasonably well, for example through the choice of factual and non-hyperbolic wording when describing dramatic situations.

Such skills are likely honed through experience and ethical awareness that the credibility of legal reporting must be preserved. In the long term, journalists' choice to prioritize education over sensation can enhance public trust in both the media and the judiciary. Research indicates that informative transparency of courts through the media can strengthen public confidence in the legal system (Johnston, 2018; Papandrea, 2012). Conversely, if the media are perceived as overly judgmental or deliberately polarizing opinion, an erosion of trust may occur (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2011). Therefore, this dilemma must continue to be managed through ethical codes and internal editorial guidelines. It may be necessary to develop specific guidelines for courtroom journalism, as has been proposed by the Indonesian Press Council, so that journalists have clear guidance in balancing educational functions and the demands of dramatization (Manan, 2015).

With regard to communication strategies for bridging law and the public, the findings of this study are concrete and highly applicable. These strategies reflect how mediating justice is operationalized through communicative practices that simplify, contextualize, and interpret legal processes for public audiences. Language simplification, provision of context, involving experts, and visualization are techniques that are well-known in the practice of explanatory journalism (Parisi, 2009). The success of journalists in implementing these strategies is reflected in public appreciation. For instance, TV One's live trial programs often receive positive feedback for being informative. The strategy of involving legal experts also aligns with the trend of interdisciplinary collaboration in modern journalism, in which journalists are not reluctant to bring in experts to enrich and verify information (Ward, 2018). This helps maintain the accuracy of substantive content, particularly because journalists typically do not have formal legal education. It also reflects the role of media as a knowledge broker that connects expert sources with the public (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2018). From a communication perspective, the effort to reshape complex terminology into easily understood forms is a manifestation of democratic communication, a type of communication that is inclusive and accessible to different segments of the public (Sevignani, 2022).

The communication strategies of TV One journalists also demonstrate adaptation to the characteristics of television as a medium. The use of infographics and visuals is an example of leveraging the strengths of an audio-visual medium for educational purposes. This is consistent with Dick's (2014) study, which emphasizes the importance of visual elements in covering legal processes to make them more engaging for contemporary audiences accustomed to visual information (Dick, 2014). Certainly, not all legal concepts can be easily visualized, but steps such as creating case timelines or graphics depicting the structure of a case greatly help audiences grasp the logic and flow of legal processes.

This study supports the recommendation that media should be creative in presenting legal information without compromising accuracy. This approach could be replicated in other types of court reporting; for example, newspapers and online media can

also include supporting infographics. In this way, the practices of TV One journalists can serve as a small model of how legal communication to the public can be carried out effectively.

In terms of professionalism and idealism, this study reveals the internal dynamics experienced by journalists. On one hand, they adhere to the core values of journalism: accuracy, impartiality, and verification, especially in sensitive coverage such as trials (Schudson and Anderson, 2009). They realize that mistakes in reporting can have serious consequences for both the credibility of the media and the judicial process. This resonates with Wittchen's (2023) findings that legal reporters often feel a heavier ethical burden because their reporting directly intersects with the fates of defendants and victims (Wittchen, 2023).

TV One journalists appear to shoulder this burden seriously, as seen in their reflective accounts of being consistently careful with their wording and the information they present. Their adherence to ethical codes, such as not taking sides and using terms like "defendant" instead of "perpetrator," reflects their professionalism. This is parallel to studies in other countries, such as Denmark, where court reporters place great emphasis on writing facts without interpretation to avoid accusations of bias (Wittchen, 2023).

On the other hand, the journalists' idealism as agents of public enlightenment is clearly visible. They view their work as meaningful in serving the public interest, a form of civic-minded journalism. This recalls the concept of civic journalism, in which journalists seek to empower citizens with information needed for democratic participation (Mellado, 2015). Courtroom coverage can be considered part of civic journalism because it relates to justice and the law, which are pillars of democracy.

The informants' idealism, expressed in their sense of "helping to safeguard justice," indicates that their professional identity leans toward the role of watchdog and educator rather than mere entertainer (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017). In role performance studies, watchdog and civic educator roles are part of normative orientations embraced by journalists in many countries (Mellado, 2015). These findings confirm that Indonesian journalists, at least in the legal field, also embody these roles.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes by positioning courtroom journalism as a form of mediating justice, emphasizing the central role of communicative practices in shaping public engagement with legal processes. First, it extends work on open justice and courtroom media by conceptualizing live courtroom journalism as a form of "mediating justice" in which journalists translate institutional transparency into communicative practices shaped by commercial and ethical constraints. Second, it enriches role performance and civic journalism research by documenting how journalists in a Global South context enact hybrid roles, as legal translators, educators, and performers, while navigating structural pressures such as ratings and editorial agendas. Third, it nuances debates on "trial by media" by showing that sensationalism is not simply an outcome imposed from above, but an arena of ongoing negotiation at the level of individual journalists who attempt to "hold the line" through strategic language choices and professional rituals.

Practically, the findings have implications for newsrooms, regulators, and judicial institutions. For news organizations, the study suggests the need for explicit internal guidelines on

11 courtroom broadcasting, ongoing training in legal basics for journalists, and editorial support that rewards accuracy and educational value rather than sensationalism alone. For regulators and press councils, the findings support initiatives to develop specific ethical codes for courtroom journalism that protect both the presumption of innocence and the public's right to information. For courts, the study indicates that constructive engagement with journalists—through accessible public relations officers, media briefings, and educational materials, can enhance the quality of coverage without undermining judicial independence.

Contextually, this study adds an important Global South perspective to predominantly Western debates on court transparency and media. Indonesia's media system, marked by commercial competition, high public interest in high-profile trials, and expanding digital access, represents a fertile setting in which to observe how justice is communication and mediated in practice. The experiences of TV One journalists demonstrate that even in a competitive television market, journalistic idealism and professionalism can persist, albeit within negotiated boundaries. Future comparative work could explore whether similar patterns occur in other countries in the region or among different types of media, such as online platforms and social media live streams.

The lived experiences of journalists also reaffirm that the meaning of a job, such as covering court proceedings, is shaped by intensive interaction between journalists and their social environment (courts, newsrooms, and the public). Each journalist interprets their role not only through formal job descriptions but also through the values they hold and the audience responses they perceive. The journalists' deep sense of mission in educating the public suggests that they experience their work as a public calling. This is consistent with theories of identity and the meaning of work, which state that workers who see their jobs as meaningful tend to have higher satisfaction and performance. Overall, the findings demonstrate that mediating justice is a dynamic communicative process shaped by journalists' practices, experiences, and professional commitments in translating law into public understanding.

The findings of this study should be situated within the broader Global South context, where the mediation of justice is shaped by specific socio-legal and media conditions. In Indonesia, the legal system operates not only through formal procedural frameworks but also through cultural dynamics that influence courtroom interactions and public perceptions of justice.

16 This context directly affects how journalists mediate justice, as they must navigate not only legal accuracy but also social expectations and symbolic meanings attached to courtroom proceedings. In addition, Indonesia's relatively flexible media regulation allows extensive live broadcasting of trials, creating a unique communicative environment in which legal processes become highly visible to the public.

1 At the same time, media ownership structures—often linked to political and economic elites—introduce additional pressures that shape editorial decisions and framing practices. These conditions complicate the role of journalistic idealism, as journalists must continuously negotiate between professional values, institutional constraints, and audience engagement in real-time reporting.

Furthermore, varying levels of public trust in judicial institutions position journalists as key mediators of justice, influencing how legal truth is constructed and interpreted in the public sphere. Compared to more tightly regulated Western contexts, the Indonesian setting illustrates a more open yet complex form of mediated justice, where information, performance, and public accountability are deeply intertwined.

5 Conclusion

The experiences of TV One journalists in live courtroom broadcasting illustrate how justice is mediated to the public through communicative practices grounded in professional and ethical considerations. This study demonstrates that courtroom journalism is not merely a process of reporting legal events, but a form of *mediated justice* in which journalists actively translate, frame, and perform legal processes for public audiences. Journalists function as legal communicators who translate judicial processes into accessible public information while upholding accuracy and factual integrity.

They face an inherent tension in mediating justice, balancing their educational function with the need to present courtroom events in engaging and publicly accessible ways. However, through professional awareness, journalists strive to prioritize educational value without entirely disregarding the human-interest elements inherent to courtroom events. Various communication strategies are employed—such as simplifying legal terminology, providing contextual explanations, involving experts, and utilizing visual elements—to support the process of mediating justice and bridging the gap between legal language and public understanding. Throughout their work, journalists reflect on the importance of maintaining professionalism—including neutrality, adherence to ethical codes, and disciplined verification—while preserving their idealism as media workers committed to serving the public interest.

Live courtroom journalism can be regarded as a concrete manifestation of the press's democratic function: informing the public while overseeing the judiciary as a form of transparent accountability. When journalists are able to navigate challenges ethically and creatively, live broadcasts of court hearings become not only a spectacle but also a source of guidance—mass legal education that enlightens society while simultaneously encouraging courts to operate with greater openness and fairness. In this way, the media truly plays the role of a bridge mediating justice in the public sphere.

This study contributes to theoretical debates on open justice, role performance, and trial by media by positioning courtroom journalism as a practice of mediating justice, grounded in journalists' lived experiences within a Global South context. It demonstrates how legal education, dramaturgy, and professionalism intersect in everyday newsroom practice. Sustaining this practice requires collective efforts, such as editorial support, proportionate regulation that does not excessively constrain press freedom, and improved journalistic capacity in legal reporting.

Naturally, this study has limitations. First, the number of informants is relatively small and drawn from a single television station, thus not fully representing the broader spectrum of courtroom journalism in Indonesia. Insights from other media organizations or from print and online journalists may differ.

Second, this research focuses on journalists' perspectives, while the views of audiences or judicial actors regarding live trial broadcasts remain unexplored. Future studies may investigate the impact of live courtroom broadcasts on public legal understanding or public perceptions of the judiciary, for example through audience research or experimental designs. Additionally, comparative studies across different media organizations or national contexts could reveal whether similar strategies and dilemmas are experienced by journalists elsewhere and could help refine a more general model of mediating justice through media.

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Ethics statement

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Author contributions

AW: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization. WN: Data curation, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Resources, Project administration. SH: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Data curation. RW: Formal analysis, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft.

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