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AZI LEV-ON

Ariel University, Israel

azilevon@gmail.com

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0248-9802

Mediatization and Justice: How Public Participation Influences Legal Processes Through Online Discovery

Abstract: Mediatization has been widely studied in politics and culture, but its implications for law remain underexplored. This research addresses that gap by analyzing how the evolving media landscape – characterized by accessible legal materials and the rise of DIY culture enabled by digital tools and social media – creates new opportunities for non-professionals to engage with legal cases. The study investigates the kinds of discoveries activists can make when discourse and action are democratized, illustrating how public engagement, facilitated by mediatization, can lead to significant contributions in legal contexts. The study focuses on how public participation influenced Roman Zadorov's 2023 acquittal in the murder case of Tair Rada in Israel. In the Zadorov case, activists consulted experts, re-analyzed evidence, and uncovered new findings, demonstrating how public involvement reshaped legal narratives and outcomes. Rather than arguing that law is driven by media, this study demonstrates how mediatization provides structures of opportunities that can make legal processes more transparent and inclusive.

Keywords: mediatization; obstruction of justice; transparency; law and media; social media; activism; public participation; democratization of justice; digital publics

Introduction

The criminal justice system is often viewed as challenging to navigate, with key information – such as legislation, legal precedents, court rulings, and procedural protocols – being difficult to access. Scholars emphasize the importance of making such information more transparent and readily available within judicial contexts. Additionally, there is ongoing debate about the value of online forums for public discourse on legal matters, whether facilitated by institutional bodies or occurring in their absence (Findlay, 2015; Fox & Rose, 2014; Jiménez-Gómez & Gascó-Hernández, 2016; McLachlin, 2003; Ure, 2019; Warren, 2014).

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Nonetheless, much like other areas of public administration, legal institutions are gradually entering the realm of social media. The slow adoption of technological advancements that promote transparency and public discourse is not unique to criminal justice but spans across various sectors of public administration (Fountain, 2001; Mergel, 2013; DePaula et al., 2018).

Still, the legal field's interaction with the analytical framework of mediatization, remains under-researched. There is limited literature that applies this theory specifically in the context of justice. This text aims to explore how mediatization affects the legal world, with a particular focus on one key aspect: the examination of materials and the discovery of findings by non-legal professionals through social media.

The Roman Zadorov case serves as a striking example of how social media can influence and shape public opinion in a legal context. After the 2006 murder of 13-year-old Tair Rada, Roman Zadorov, a flooring installer, was arrested and later convicted. However, public skepticism about his guilt persisted, driven by inconsistencies in his confession and the emergence of alternative theories. This skepticism was further amplified by the extensive social media campaigns advocating for Zadorov's innocence.

Since 2009, and especially after 2013, numerous Facebook groups were established to discuss the Zadorov case, with the largest group becoming one of the most prominent in Israel. Investigation materials were shared on dedicated websites, and related content, including investigative videos and reconstructions, was disseminated via YouTube channels. This social media activism not only kept public interest in the case alive but also enabled broader public involvement in what is traditionally a closed legal discourse.

In 2023, after years of public pressure and legal appeals, Roman Zadorov was found innocent in a retrial. In the text, I demonstrate how social media activism surrounding the Zadorov case exemplifies the power of mediatization in the legal field. The sharing of legal materials and the public's critical involvement have shifted the boundaries of traditional legal proceedings, allowing non-professionals to actively participate in discussions and challenge official narratives. The accessibility of these materials, combined with the active participation of "outsiders", underscores the significant impact of these activities on public perceptions. The Zadorov case serves as a pivotal example of how mediatization can permeate the legal sphere, showing how openness, accessibility, and social media can not only raise awareness but also lead to important discoveries that challenge the conventional legal process.

Literature review

Mediatization and justice

The mediatization analytical framework refers to the process by which media increasingly influence the shaping and framing of social, cultural, and political prac-

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tices and institutions. It emphasizes how technologies alter the way information is transmitted, impacting interactions, relationships, perceptions, and behaviors across many different contexts (Strömbäck, 2008; Couldry & Hepp, 2013; Deacon & Stanyer, 2014; Jensen, 2013; Hepp, 2017; Hjarvard, 2017).

Another related theoretical development by researcher Andreas Hepp (2017, 2019) is found in the concept of "Deep Mediatization". According to Hepp, "Deep Mediatization" is a stage in mediatization where practices and meaning-making in various fields of our social world are closely linked to mediated communication practices. The uniqueness of "Deep Mediatization" lies in three characteristics: 1) it bridges different media (cross-media); 2) it is multifaceted (rather than dichotomous); and 3) it is reflexive – in the sense that it incorporates practical awareness of the characteristics of the media that are chosen and utilized.

I aim to engage with the mediatization framework and its application in the legal context. However, this framework is equally relevant across various other fields. For example, mediatization studies have been applied to areas such as politics (Landerer, 2013; Meyen et al., 2014), work (Örnebring et al., in press), religion (Wei, 2024), sports (Kopecka-Piech, 2019), public relations (Strömbäck & Esser, 2017), and even mourning (Giaxoglou & Döveling, 2018).

The criminal justice system is often perceived as complex and challenging to navigate, with relevant information – such as legislation, precedents, court rulings, and procedural protocols – being difficult to access. Scholars emphasize the importance of making this information more accessible in judicial contexts. Debates also focus on the need for online forums that facilitate public discourse on legal matters, whether through the participation of institutional bodies or in their absence (Findlay, 2015; Fox & Rose, 2014; Jiménez-Gómez & Gascó-Hernández, 2016; McLachlin, 2003; Ure, 2019; Warren, 2014). Nonetheless, much like in other realms of public administration, legal institutions slowly find their way into the realm of social media. The gradual embrace of technological advancements that facilitate transparency and public discourse is not confined solely to the realm of criminal justice; it extends across diverse domains within public administration (Fountain, 2001; Mergel, 2013; DePaula et al., 2018). However, it is still uncommon to find arenas where open and accessible materials, as well as multi-participant discourse, are readily available.

Police investigations and legal proceedings are typically conducted behind closed doors, accessible only to a limited group of professionals such as investigators, lawyers, and judges. As a result, the general public is excluded from these processes and lacks a platform for meaningful engagement or discussion. This restricted access limits the public's ability to directly engage with legal materials, leaving them to rely primarily on processed information disseminated by institutionalized media channels to form their understanding of legal matters (Lev-On, 2023c; Grossman & Lev-On, 2023).

But what happens when materials become available and a viable platform for discussion emerges? This paper explores the consequences of digitization, transparency,

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and participatory discourse in legal cases, focusing specifically on the extensive public engagement surrounding the Zadorov trial on social media. The media landscape in this case became notably more open and accessible, allowing for widespread discussion and debate compared to similar cases in the past. By examining the media dynamics surrounding the Zadorov case, valuable insights can be gained into how media engagement transforms legal discourse and its impact on public perception and involvement.

In particular, the paper focuses on discoveries made by activists and non-legal professionals who utilized social media platforms to examine, challenge, and contribute to the discourse surrounding Zadorov's case. Their participation, fueled by the availability of legal documents and investigative materials, helped reshape the narrative, raising important questions about the role of "outsiders" in influencing legal processes and outcomes. This exploration highlights the potential for social media to democratize legal discourse, offering lessons for future cases where public involvement may play a critical role in the pursuit of justice.

DIY content creation in legal discourse

The growing ability of individuals to upload, process, and engage with video content is part of the broader do-it-yourself (DIY) trend, which encompasses self-produced podcasts, music, or videos created by non-professionals using tools and techniques that were once the exclusive domain of skilled experts (Knobel & Lankshear, 2010). This content ranges from original creations made from scratch to the repurposing of existing TV excerpts with minor edits, aimed at highlighting arguments or supporting specific narratives (Burgess & Green, 2009).

A key factor influencing users' engagement in content creation is the complexity of the topic being addressed. For example, a series with a complex plot can spark extensive and in-depth discourse in both textual and visual forms (Mittell, 2015; Harriss, 2017). When the DIY phenomenon is applied to the legal arena, it broadens the circle of participants in the production and dissemination of information and knowledge.

According to media and law researchers, a structural interdependence exists between journalists covering the police and legal domain, and the institutions they report on, which also serve as their primary source of information (Schudson, 2002). However, alongside these "insiders" – such as police officers, lawyers, and reporters – other actors also engage in the struggle over agenda-setting and the framing of legal affairs. Typically, the public lacks access to legal materials, and its ability to participate in these struggles is limited. This study explores what happens when the DIY phenomenon extends to the legal arena.

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Research environment: The social media activity for justice for Roman Zadorov

On December 6, 2006, 13-year-old Tair Rada was found lifeless at the school where she studied in Katzrin, Israel. Roman Zadorov, a flooring installer who worked at the school, was arrested six days after the murder and confessed a week later. After a second confession and immediate recantation, he consistently denied any connection to the murder. In 2010, Zadorov was convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison.

The verdict cited a "high-quality, dense and real fabric of evidence" against Zadorov, including his confessions to an informant and police investigators, reconstruction of the murder, and a shoe imprint on the victim's pants that police experts claimed likely matched Zadorov's shoe. His confessions revealed concealed details such as the toilet stall number where the murder occurred, the resting position of the victim's body, specific incisions, knowledge that the victim was not raped, the inability to lock the stall from outside, and the killer's escape route. Circumstantial evidence also linked Zadorov to the murder decisively, according to the court. Zadorov's appeal to the Supreme Court was rejected in 2015 by a two-to-one judge majority.

Despite the court's ruling, public opinion overwhelmingly believed in Zadorov's innocence. Opinion polls consistently showed this sentiment. In 2021, the Supreme Court granted Zadorov a retrial, and in 2023, he was acquitted (Lev-On, 2023c). The case attracted significant public attention immediately after the murder, partly due to the victim being a young girl murdered in broad daylight at school – a place expected to be safe. This was the first and only case in Israel of a murder occurring on school grounds while hundreds of students, teachers, and staff were present.

Tair Rada's mother also cast doubt on Zadorov's involvement shortly after his confession, which contributed to public skepticism. Over the years, inconsistencies in Zadorov's confession and reconstruction raised further doubts. Alternative narratives about the identity of the murderer, the manner of the murder, and the motives also emerged. In 2012, Adir Habani testified that his then-girlfriend, Ola Kravchenko, confessed to him on the night of the murder and showed him the murder tools and her blood-stained clothes.

Public and media interest in the case has not waned over the years between the murder and Zadorov's ultimate acquittal. One significant factor is the intensive social media activity advocating for Zadorov's innocence. Since 2009, and especially since 2013, numerous Facebook groups have been established to discuss the case. Following the rejection of Zadorov's Supreme Court appeal in 2015, the number of group members surged, with the largest group, "the whole truth about the murder of the late Tair Rada", becoming one of the largest in Israel (Ben-Israel, 2016). Investigation materials were made available on the "Truth Today" website starting in 2016, and several YouTube channels featured related video materials, including investigative videos, conversations with the police informer, and the reconstruction (Lev-On, 2023b,

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2023c). The activity on social media for Zadorov is unique in several ways (Grossman & Lev-On, 2023; Lev-On, 2023a, 2023c):

1. Context: The activity takes place within the context of a murder trial and a call for justice for wrongful convictions, from the activists' perspective. Typically, police investigations and legal proceedings are far from public view.

2. Identity of Participants: As argued before, public discourse on law and justice usually involves "insiders" like police officers, lawyers, judges, reporters, and legal commentators. In the Zadorov case, however, "outsiders", including activists familiar with both small and large issues, play a significant role.

3. Significant Effects: The activity has impacted public images and opinions. For example, the place where the murder occurred and friends of Tair Rada were accused online without foundation. It also influenced opinions about the functioning of state institutions and Zadorov's guilt or innocence (Lev-On, 2023c; Lev-On & Steinfeld, 2024).

The activism surrounding the Zadorov case presents a fascinating opportunity to examine the characteristics and effects of social media-driven activism. It exemplifies the consequences of deep mediatization within a legal context, expanding the circle of participants in what was once considered a closed legal discourse, traditionally confined to a small group of stakeholders (Lev-On, 2023a, 2023c).

Next, I investigate the kinds of investigations and discoveries that can be made by activists when mediatization becomes deep. This exploration focuses on how the democratization of legal discourse enables non-professionals to engage with legal processes, contributing meaningful insights and challenging established narratives. By examining the activities and findings of activists in the Zadorov case, I highlight the transformative potential of deep mediatization in the legal domain, emphasizing the ways in which media affordances create opportunities for public participation and impact.

Method

This study is based on netnographic research. Netnography is a qualitative-interpretive research approach to studying the behavioral and communicative patterns of individuals and groups online (Kozinets, 2010; Rageh & Melewar, 2013). Netnography involves collecting data from online sources as social networks, chats, petition sites, and more. Researchers can identify communities, observe and join them, and interview participants. The triangulation of participant observation, interviews, and content analysis enables a comprehensive picture of the justice for Zadorov activism. This netnographic study lasted seven years, from 2015 (the rejection of Zadorov's appeal to the Supreme Court and resulting intensification of activism) to his acquittal in 2023.

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Participant observation

Contacts were established with group administrators and leading activists. Conversations with administrators were about content that was published, issues and dilemmas that arose, and activities that occurred.

Content analysis

I have employed several methods to ensure the inclusion of a maximum number of relevant posts. Firstly, with the assistance of activists, I identified and mapped the active Facebook groups related to Zadorov, subsequently focusing on the five largest groups that attracted the most active participants. Secondly, I utilized the netvizz software initially, and after its discontinuation, I transitioned to using CrowdTangle software to back up all the posts published within these groups. This resulted in a collection of over 10,000 posts and hundreds of thousands of comments. The content analysis was carried out thematically by repeatedly reviewing the texts and identifying recurring themes, which were subsequently categorized.

Interviews

Twenty-five interviews with group administrators were conducted- among other issues, about the truth-value and content of stories posted online, and reactions by admins. The interviews lasted an hour to an hour-and-a-half, and were conducted by four interviewers under the supervision of the lead researcher. Interviews were especially useful in learning about discoveries made activists.

Findings

Discoveries by activists and their assistance to the legal process

The contribution of activists in the Zadorov affair is most prominently seen in their discoveries, which vary in legal significance. Some relate to secondary issues raised in the investigation materials that do not directly impact the main legal arguments, while others touch on core aspects of the case. I will now review some of these discoveries, ranging from minor to major.

Retrieving messages from the Nofey Golan School Forum

Immediately after the murder, the school's online forum became a space where people offered support and condolences, and some users even claimed to have in-

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formation about the crime. In several instances, police investigators traced the IP addresses of these contributors and concluded that they were merely adolescents with a prurient interest. However, activists continue to search for clues within the forum messages, which have become a rich source of rumors about the identity of the killers, their motives, and the sequence of events leading to the murder. More than 15 years after the crime, and following the initiation of the retrial, Ilana Rada (the victim's mother) claimed, based on numerous testimonies, that her daughter was murdered by fellow students. She supported her claims by pointing to phone calls, ICQ chat messages exchanged with Tair, and posts on the school forum.

Shortly after the murder, police investigators requested that the forum administrator "cool things down", leading to the deletion of thousands of original messages from the forum. However, some of these messages were secretly preserved using the website's backup on the Internet Archive (Wayback Machine). An activist nicknamed Dia Rose, with expertise in computer technology, managed to recover approximately 60% of the deleted messages (by his estimation) through advanced searches on the site (see Figure 1). Even if no new information emerges from these recovered messages, they may still help to quell ongoing rumors and speculations.



Dia Rose

Forum Nofei Golan - The Missing Messages.
What hasn't been written about the Nofei Golan Forum?
That the respondents there know who the murderer is and what his motive is, that the people involved themselves responded there, that the school administration deleted the history to cover up, and more.
On 11/12 around 10:00 in the morning, the site management deleted the forum history, which contained several hundred responses. We managed to recover about 60% of the deleted messages and uploaded them to the site for your review. You can get an impression of the forum's atmosphere. Most of the respondents express solidarity and support, and the rest try to glean details about the murderer's identity.

Figure 1. Excerpt from the group "The Truth Today"

A review and re-translation of investigation materials

One of the most significant contributions made by the activists seeking justice for Zadorov was the extensive project of retranslating approx. 110 hours of interrogation videos, conversations, and reconstructions. This project was led by Edik Feinstein, a veteran from the former Soviet Union, who collaborated with Russian-speaking activists to produce a new translation that differed substantially from the official one. Feinstein's translation was uploaded as subtitles on the videos, and in 2021, the defense submitted his work as part of Zadorov's retrial. The court subsequently accepted it as the official translation of the videos.

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The original translations, carried out by a company hired by the police, were generally accurate but contained significant inaccuracies and omissions in key areas, such as the concept of "murder in effect mode" (blackout). During the investigation and in conversations with informants, Zadorov used the notion of a "state of effect" as an excuse, suggesting he might have murdered Tair without remembering. The original translation indicated that Zadorov himself raised the possibility of murder in a "state of effect" during his first video-recorded interrogation (December 12, 2006). However, the activists' review revealed that before Zadorov mentioned "murder in effect", the investigator made a gesture near his temple, which Zadorov interpreted and verbalized. This discovery is significant because it shows that the concept of "blackout" was first introduced by the investigator, not Zadorov, even if it was conveyed non-verbally. In the retrial, the judges, in their majority opinion, accepted this argument (TAF 502/07 (retrial), Section 444 of Judge Kola's judgment).

Another crucial discovery made during the re-translation process involved a conversation between police informants, revealing a request that the investigation team pass on information about how the murder was carried out. Activist Shirley Ben-Yonathan found that on the morning of December 15, 2006, the informants spoke to each other when Zadorov was not present in the cell. In this conversation, one informant told the other to communicate with the investigation team to obtain details about the murder. This request violated the procedures governing the operation of informants, who are not supposed to have knowledge of the details of the crime scene. In the official transcript, most of this conversation was marked as "inaudible". This information was included in the request for a retrial and was brought up during the retrial.

Locating the police informant's guidance of Zadorov

The activists' re-transcription of the conversations from Zadorov's detention on December 15, 2006, led to claims that Arthur, one of the informants, was the source of many details later included in Zadorov's confession. On that day, Arthur suggested to Zadorov that he should claim Tair Rada (the victim) had insulted his mother and made derogatory remarks about his Russian heritage, which could serve as a motive for the murder. Arthur also told Zadorov that if a murder is committed without facing the victim, the only things that get bloodstained are the knife – which can be washed and discarded – and the hands, which can also be cleaned. Zadorov later repeated this advice almost verbatim in his confession.

While Zadorov's defense in the original trial argued that his confession had been influenced by the informants, they did not specifically highlight this conversation, which could be seen as a clear instance of coaching. However, due to the activists' efforts, this issue was raised in the request for a retrial and became a central point of discussion during the proceedings. The judges, in their majority opinion, acknowledged the influence of Arthur's statements on December 15, citing examples in their

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judgments that demonstrated how these statements shaped Zadorov's confession (TAF 502/07 (retrial), Section 339 of Judge Kola's judgment, Sections 213–218 of Judge Zarfati's judgment).

Another significant discovery emerged from the activists' review of a video recorded in the detention cell on December 14, 2006. In this video, a segment dealing with the discussion of bloodstains was paired with an audio track from another part of the same video. The evidence indicates that the video was edited in a way that reinforced suspicions against Zadorov (see Figure 2). This section of the video was presented in the original trial in its "edited" form, as neither party noticed the mismatch between the video and the audio.



The Interrogations of Roman Zadorov: Translations by Adik Feinstein

This is How the Prosecution Presented a Cooked Exhibit to the Court.
On 14.12 around 20:30 in the evening (Part 4 uploaded yesterday), Roman tells the undercover agents that he is glad the police started looking for his pants, which he said he threw at the garbage site.
The undercover agent Evgeny asks Roman if the police find these pants, will there be blood stains on them? Roman denies it, but there is a possibility that there might be one or two small drops, as it sometimes happens when people get cut or hit naturally.
But in any case, there is no amount of blood that should be on the killer's pants. After all, the killer murdered the victim with a knife, so his clothes should be soaked in blood, including the pants.
In response, the undercover agents start to speculate and mention specific cases where the killer with a knife would not get dirty with blood. The undercover agent Arthur says, among other things, that if the killer slits the victim's throat from behind, he won't get dirty with blood, except for his hands, which he can wash.

The prosecution in its summary referred to the above section, adding that Roman demonstrated knowledge in anatomy and blood vessels, and to illustrate his knowledge, submitted the following clip to the court under reference 140.
But oops, you can easily see that the soundtrack does not match the video! The soundtrack was pasted onto another part of the video.
...
There is no trace of the very clear demonstration by the undercover agent Arthur.
As you probably understood, the prosecution's interest in taking the sound segment and pasting it onto another video segment is to distance the video from the incriminating images so that the court would not be impressed by Arthur's demonstration, and instead see just empty talk and gestures.
How convenient for the prosecution that the court does not speak Russian.
What is certain is that the prosecution did not anticipate that someone in the future would sit, read the transcripts, and find these "mistakes".

Figure 2. Excerpt from "The Investigations of Roman Zadorov"

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Discovery of Tair's blood in stall three

Activist Alon Ekroni, after meticulously reviewing the forensic reports in the legal file, uncovered that Dr. Mia Freund, head of the biological laboratory, had mistakenly classified evidence related to the toilet paper dispenser from stall three as if it belonged to stall two – the stall where the murder occurred. Crucially, traces of Tair's blood were found on this dispenser.

This discovery, akin to finding a needle in a haystack amid hundreds of exhibits, had been overlooked by both the defense and the prosecution. The presence of Tair's blood and DNA in the third stall supports other evidence suggesting that the murderer moved to the adjacent stall after committing the crime, contradicting Zadorov's reconstruction of events. This pivotal finding played a crucial role in the decision to order a retrial and was accepted by the majority opinion in the retrial's verdict.

Refuting claims about the shelter lock

Another important revelation made by activists concerns the state of the lock on the shelter where Zadorov worked, challenging the claim that he deliberately jammed it with a toothpick to hinder investigators from accessing his bag. On the day of the murder, Zadorov was working in Shelter 2, located one and a half floors below the bathroom where Tair Rada was killed. As the search for Tair intensified that evening, searchers inspected various shelters, including the one where Zadorov had been working. They found the lock difficult to open and ultimately had to break it, later discovering that a toothpick had been inserted into the mechanism. Given that Zadorov had left a bag with his clothes in the shelter that day, suspicions arose that he had tampered with the lock to prevent discovery of potentially incriminating evidence. During an interrogation on January 11, 2007, Zadorov maintained, consistent with his previous statements, that the lock had not been secured at all.

After conducting a thorough investigation into the toothpick found in the lock, some activists consulted with locksmiths familiar with the specific lock model. They concluded, as detailed in a document they produced (with a relevant excerpt shown in Figure 3), that it was highly unlikely – if not impossible – for the lock to have been engaged when it was cut. If the lock had been engaged, the ear in front of the keyhole would have remained locked inside, as seen in Figure 4. However, a significant portion of the ear had broken off (as shown in the photo within Figure 3), indicating that the lock was likely cut while it was open. It is possible that, in the heat of the moment, the person who broke the lock did not attempt to manually unlock it and instead rushed to break it. Upon reviewing the photos and comparing them to the original lock model, the activists argued that the shelter door had been open, not locked. This assertion was further supported by expert opinions submitted during the retrial, including a photo of a similar lock that was broken while locked (see Figure 4) – further supporting Zadorov's innocence.

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The Toothpick in the Shelter Lock:
Another Example of "Evidence" Built Out of Nothing

The following was written with the kind assistance of Nir Yosod, locksmiths, and those experienced with this type of lock.

According to the police, three weeks after the murder, they found a broken lock hanging with a cable on the door of the shelter where Zadorov worked. When the housekeeper was asked about it, he explained that during the searches for Tair, all the shelters were opened with a master key, except for the shelter where Zadorov worked, where the key did not fully insert. In the end, the lock was cut by tin snips.

The police suspected that someone deliberately tried to prevent entry into the shelter and, with the help of maintenance personnel, examined the lock, finding a toothpick inserted into it. When Roman was questioned about it, he denied it completely, claiming that the lock had already had issues and wasn't locking properly, so he used to hang it on the door in a closed but not locked state. The police didn't believe his version and claimed he tampered with the lock to prevent entry and discovery of his bloodstained belongings.

If the police hadn't locked onto Roman Zadorov, they would have found his version much more reasonable and logical:

It wasn't proven in any way that he tampered with the lock, and there are several significant reinforcements to his claim:
The illogical nature of the act attributed to him, his statements in the initial investigations, and the testimonies of the cleaners and housekeeper.

But mainly, the photo of the cut lock, which shows it's unlikely it was cut while locked.



What actually happened was that the housekeeper, in the rush of the searches, didn't notice the lock was closed but not locked, and when he saw the key wouldn't go in, he cut it.

Detailed explanation on the following pages: - ›- ›-›

Figure 3. A document written by activists regarding the toothpick in the lock

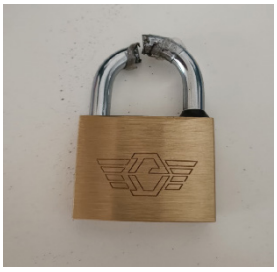


Figure 4. The lock as it would have looked if it had been broken while locked

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Debunking the alleged search for intimidation methods

Another significant discovery made by the activists was that Zadorov did not search his computer for information on methods of intimidation shortly before the murder, contrary to claims made during the trial.

During the trial, it was alleged that Zadorov had searched the internet for materials on assault and intimidation, with a document on this topic found in his browsing history. However, after a review of the browsing history from the day the document was saved – a detail overlooked by Zadorov's defense in the original trial – activists discovered that Zadorov had actually been searching for information on Motorola devices, specifically the model of his cell phone. Among the many documents saved in his browsing history were various ringtones for the Motorola device, including the document in question. The footer on each page read "Motorola c650". Aside from this document, no other materials related to intimidation or murder were found in his browsing history that day.

The activists argued that the document was saved "innocently" during Zadorov's search for information on Motorola devices, undermining the prosecution's claim of criminal intent. Despite the browsing history document being in the possession of both the defense and prosecution for over a decade, it was only reexamined by an activist. During the retrial, the prosecution accepted the defense's expert opinion, which confirmed the activists' discovery, and subsequently withdrew its original claim.

Exposing the origin of the pornographic images found in Zadorov's computer

A further discovery revealed by activists was that the source of the pornographic images found on Zadorov's computer was a previous user, not Zadorov himself. In the original trial, the prosecution presented the testimony of police computer expert Sergeant Tzachi Segal, who stated that pornographic images of minors were found on Zadorov's computer. This finding was used to strengthen the prosecution's claim that Zadorov had a deviant personality and an interest in minors. The verdict accepted this evidence and concluded that "the computer findings as such also add another layer [to the conviction]".

However, following thorough investigations by activists, a request for a retrial was submitted, which included the expert opinion of Yoav Zilberstein, CEO of Tik Tech Technologies Ltd., an information recovery company. Zilberstein's expert analysis substantiated the evidence uncovered by the activists. Zilberstein determined that the photos were not downloaded by Zadorov, but by a previous user. It was discovered that Zadorov had purchased a used hard disk and created two user accounts: "Roma" for himself in January 2006 and "Olga" for his wife in September 2006. The user who had saved the photos of minors was named Dominic, and the viewing dates were between 2003 and 2005, long before Zadorov bought the hard disk.

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In his ruling, Judge Dani Zarfati (who acquitted Zadorov) referred to this reinterpretation of the computer evidence as a significant factor in the differences between the retrial verdict and those of the previous courts. The findings from Zadorov's computer were no longer used by the prosecution to vilify his character, marking a critical shift in the case (TAF 502/07 (retrial), Section 333 of Judge Zarfati's judgment).

Activists' additional contributions to the defense and legal process

These discoveries represent only a fraction of the extensive and varied activities undertaken by the activists in their pursuit of uncovering the truth and achieving justice. For instance, the activists created and shared tables of hair samples from the crime scene and the related tests, as well as records of the young people who were present in the bathroom and what they witnessed. Other activists examined Ola Kravchenko's paintings for potential clues to the murder, contacting people who knew her and others associated with the case (including those not investigated by the police), engaging in conversations with them, and even collecting samples for testing.

Some activists reexamined exhibits from the case and consulted numerous experts, such as shoeprint specialists from around the world, to identify the shoe that left blood traces in the murder stall. During the retrial, police expert Yaron Shor suggested that an analysis performed by an English expert on behalf of one of the activists be handed over to the police or the prosecutor's office. When such a recommendation comes from a reputable and leading expert, it serves as clear evidence of the quality of the research conducted by the activists.

Other activists conducted fieldwork in Katsrin (the city where the murder occurred) and at the school itself, leading to significant discoveries. For example, one activist found peeling paint in the boys' bathroom at the school, which closely resembled the alleged peeling paint on the door frame of the murder stall that appeared to be bloodstains (Figure 5). This finding was handed over to the defense and submitted as part of the retrial to support the claim that the bathroom was closed at the time of the murder.

It is not surprising that online activity sometimes leads to a desire to participate in the "real thing" and assist the parties involved in the formal process of justice. Zadorov's defense team welcomed the help of some activists, who, through their online discussions and discoveries, transitioned to becoming legally significant contributors.

The assistance provided by activists to Zadorov's defense was more substantial than in other cases. Over the years, Zadorov had four different defense teams. Attorney Aryeh Harmelin represented him at the beginning of his arrest, while Attorney David Spiegel took over from the end of 2006 until early 2011. During the preliminary court hearings in 2007, Attorney Galil Spiegel joined the defense team. From 2011 to 2016, Zadorov was represented by Attorney Dr. Elkana Leist from the Public Defender's Office, along with other lawyers, including Attorney Itai Harmelin and Attorney Avigdor Feldman. From 2016 until his acquittal, Attorney Yarom Halevi represented

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Figure 5. Peeling paint in the boys' bathroom – a photo taken by an activist and submitted as part of the retrial

Zadorov, and for part of that time, he was joined by Attorney Moshe Sherman. Over the years, a vast amount of legal material accumulated, requiring extensive study and a deep understanding of the context.

The extensive group of activists that rallied around the Zadorov case over the years became highly familiar with the investigative materials, dedicating significant time and effort to analyzing and discussing the case. According to Attorney Halevi, their assistance was indeed invaluable. The extent to which the activists' efforts aligned with the defense team's needs created a synergy where "supply" met "demand" (Lev-On, 2023c).

The significant public activity in support of Zadorov began immediately after his arrest, with private individuals approaching the defense team to offer help. Activists also assisted the lawyers from the Public Defender's Office, a phenomenon that became more prominent when Attorney Halevi began representing Zadorov. Halevi became a magnet for activists, and in an interview, he stated that his door was open to them and that they were providing significant help. Many sections of the request for a retrial were based on the activists' discoveries, and they assisted in drafting numerous legal documents, including the defense summaries for the retrial.

Such tasks, which typically fall to legal assistants and require considerable expertise, time, and sometimes money, were performed for free by activists who had an in-depth knowledge of the legal material. This support greatly benefited the defense team. The activists focused on different aspects of the case: some specialized in forensic issues, others were intimately familiar with every minute of the investigation videos, and some had detailed knowledge of the investigation materials related to the

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victim's activities on the day of the murder. This division of labor allowed the defense team to consult with different activists on various issues.

The involvement of activists extended beyond the main legal process. Several activists worked closely with Ilana Rada, assisting her legally. For example, they submitted a request on her behalf to retrieve the family computer and Tair's phone, which had been confiscated by the police. The original request was submitted by activist Avi Amar on his own behalf, on behalf of Ilana Rada, and "on behalf of the 250,000 members of the Facebook group". Activists also helped activate Ilana Rada's Facebook page, which became a central platform for disseminating information about the case.

However, the activities of Zadorov's supporters were not always well-received, especially when they were not coordinated with his legal team. In some instances, the defense viewed these actions as intrusive and even detrimental to their ability to represent him effectively (Lev-On, 2022). For example, in 2016, activists submitted a request to the Supreme Court against the advice of Attorney Halevi, Zadorov's lawyer. In a television interview, Halevi stated:

> This petition (...) is out of place and it causes damage to Zadorov's case (...) With all due respect to the activists and their goodwill, they have no right to stand in the Supreme Court, they don't represent Zadorov (...) What does this look like to me? It's like a soccer game with two teams. Roman Zadorov and his lawyers are on one side, the prosecutor's office and the judge are on the other, and suddenly a naked fan enters the field, grabs the ball, and runs to score a goal for the team he is a fan of (...) it's very fun, and the crowd is very cheering and amused (...) [still,] this naked fan (...) attracts attention, but he doesn't belong in the game.

The advantages of relying on activists became particularly evident during the preparations for the retrial and its administration. For example, to recruit expert witnesses, it was necessary to collect money from the public – a process led and supported by activists. Several activists continued to serve as advisors, regularly discussing issues arising from the investigation materials with Attorney Halevi. This collaboration was visibly and publicly expressed in the courtroom itself, where certain activists sometimes sat next to the defense attorney and answered his questions. However, during the retrial, there were instances where other activists submitted requests to the court to subpoena themselves as witnesses, present evidence, or cross-examine other witnesses – actions that were in stark contrast to Zadorov's defense attorney's strategy.

Those present at the retrial hearings could not ignore the clear asymmetry between the prosecution and Zadorov's defense. For instance, when the prosecution decided to retranslate all the interrogations and conversations with voice actors, it was able to do so quickly, while it took years for the activists and the defense team to produce a similar translation. The prosecution had the budget to fund hair and other forensic examinations from the crime scene, while the defense had to raise funds through family contributions (which were not always forthcoming) or public

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crowdfunding. The Public Defender's Office was represented by several lawyers who appeared in the courtroom with their interns, focusing on various aspects of the case, whereas Attorney Halevi often stood alone or with one other lawyer. This asymmetry was significant in terms of the ability to organize and review the materials needed to provide an adequate defense in court. Therefore, the supportive network of activists was highly valuable to Zadorov's representative, according to him.

Discussion and conclusions: Mediatization and its impact in the legal field

Mediatization is a well-established analytical framework in media studies, referring to the process by which media shapes and influences various aspects of society, including social, political, and cultural domains. While there is extensive literature on the impact of mediatization in areas such as politics, its implications for the legal field remain underexplored. This study does not suggest that law is driven by media but rather examines how the evolving media landscape provides new structures of opportunities and affordances for public engagement. Specifically, it focuses on the role of accessible legal materials in enabling non-professionals to contribute to legal processes, highlighting one significant outcome of mediatization within the legal context.

The case of Roman Zadorov, with its unique circumstances, serves as a prime example of how mediatization can permeate the legal sphere. The widespread availability of case materials and the existence of multiple platforms for discussion allowed ordinary people to engage deeply with the case. These people, motivated by a sense of justice (Lev-On, 2024), used available tools to uncover new insights and challenge the established narrative. This phenomenon exemplifies a broader trend where mediatization enables public participation in areas traditionally reserved for professionals, such as law.

The intersection of DIY culture and legal participation

This study also intersects with another contemporary trend: the rise of DIY (do it yourself) culture. With the proliferation of new technologies – such as social media, smartphones, and various digital tools – people have gained the ability to create, manipulate, and share content with ease. Whether it is editing images, replicating dances, or producing videos, people are increasingly accustomed to using these tools to express themselves and contribute to broader conversations.

These skills and the mindset that the internet is a space for creativity and sharing have found their way into the legal domain. Although the legal system is traditionally seen as formal and inaccessible to the average person, the Zadorov case demonstrates how these DIY approaches can also be applied to legal processes. In this instance, people used their digital literacy and creative problem-solving skills to engage with and influence the legal proceedings.

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Analyzing the impact of public participation in the Zadorov case

In examining the Zadorov case, I investigated how the accessibility of legal materials and the public's ability to participate influenced the legal process. The case is unique in its extensive media coverage and the openness of the materials, which allowed many people who believed justice had not been served to take action. These people reasoned that, based on the available evidence, there were still undiscovered truths to be found, and they took it upon themselves to uncover them.

The study highlights several categories of contributions made by the public in this case, including:

1. Re-analysis of Existing Materials: Activists revisited existing evidence, such as Zadorov's conversations with informants, and produced more accurate translations or interpretations.
2. Discovery of New Evidence: Through meticulous review, activists uncovered evidence that had been overlooked or misinterpreted, such as the misclassification of blood evidence in the murder scene.
3. Expert Consultation: Activists engaged with experts in various fields to re-evaluate key pieces of evidence, providing alternative analyses that challenged the prosecution's narrative.
4. Public Discourse and Advocacy: Social media platforms served as forums for activists to share their findings, mobilize public opinion, and advocate for a retrial.

These activities demonstrate how mediatization and the tools available to the public can contribute to the legal process, particularly in cases where there is significant public interest and accessible materials. This study does not argue that law is driven or fundamentally shaped by the media. Rather, it examines how the evolving media landscape creates new structures of opportunities and affordances that influence public engagement with legal processes. By focusing on one such example – the contributions of non-legal professionals through social media in the Zadorov case – this paper highlights how mediatization provides avenues for public participation and transparency in traditionally closed legal systems. Future research could explore other contexts and mechanisms where media affordances intersect with legal practices, to build a broader understanding of this evolving dynamic.

The implications of mediatization in the legal field suggest that, in certain cases – though not in every trial or investigation – the availability and accessibility of legal materials enable the public to contribute their "two cents" and assist in various aspects of the legal process. This is particularly true in cases that meet specific conditions, such as widespread public interest, the availability of relevant materials, and the public's capacity to collaborate and engage meaningfully with the case.

However, it is important to note that this phenomenon is not universally applicable. It requires a confluence of factors – public interest, material accessibility, and digital literacy – without which public participation might not be as impactful. Future

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research could explore similar phenomena in other cases around the world, examining what discoveries the public made in those contexts and how these findings can be integrated into a broader understanding of mediatization's role in legal processes.

This study suggests that as mediatization continues to penetrate various aspects of society, including the traditionally closed legal system, the boundaries between public and professional participation in legal processes are increasingly blurred. The Zadorov case serves as a compelling example of how mediatization can empower the public to play an active role in seeking justice, challenging the status quo, and contributing meaningfully to legal outcomes.

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