## ARTICLE

Check for updates

# Democratizing the discourse on criminal justice in social media: the activity for justice for Roman Zadorov as a case study

Azi Lev-On [ID] [1✉]

The outcomes of police investigations and legal proceedings frequently remain shielded from public scrutiny, leaving ordinary individuals devoid of access to these results and devoid of platforms for discourse. As a result, the general public's ability to access legal materials and partake in informed discussions about them remains constricted, often reliant on processed information disseminated through mainstream media channels. However, what unfolds when materials become accessible and discussion platforms attain viability? This article studies the conditions that lead to more meaningful and extensive participation by non-state actors in criminal investigations. It also examines the attributes and consequences of the "democratization of knowledge" concerning legal cases, exemplified by the expansive public discourse surrounding the Zadorov trial on Israeli social media platforms. The paper highlights three conditions of such democratization processes: (1) the digitization of investigative materials, (2) the transparency of investigative materials to the public, and (3) the existence of discursive arenas in which people can discuss the case. I proceed to outline several ramifications stemming from the previously discussed traits of these democratization processes: (1) The preservation of materials related to individuals implicated in specific troublesome situations; (2) The utilization of "raw materials" to articulate stances and viewpoints; (3) The employment of materials to construct narratives that diverge significantly from those embraced by the establishment; and (4) The recurrent references to private individuals or public officials who might be deemed unprofessional or even corrupt.

[1] Ariel University, Ariel, Israel. ✉email: azilevon@gmail.com

## Introduction

The criminal justice system is seen by many as difficult to navigate, and relevant information (for example, regarding legislation, precedents, court rulings, and protocols of legal processes) can be difficult to locate. Scholars and public figures argue about the importance of *releasing information* and making it accessible in judicial contexts. Arguments also arise about the importance of having online forums in which *public discourse on legal affairs* is held, with the participation of institutional bodies, or even their absence (Findlay, 2015; Fox and Rose, 2014; Jiménez-Gómez and 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.

This article explores, using a broad brush, the conditions for and characteristics *and impacts* of democratizing public discourse on law and justice, focusing on the case of public engagement on social media in the pursuit of justice for Roman Zadorov. By using the term "democratization," I refer to the expansion of participation in the generation and dissemination of information and knowledge (for a similar implementation of democratization see Benkler, 2006; Dryzek, 2009; for a general discussion regarding the use of the term democratization in different contexts, see Geddes, 1999; Papacharissi, 2004; Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012).

In many contexts, social media allows people to get involved in creating and disseminating information and knowledge. The "flagship example" of these processes is the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. In the not-too-distant past, encyclopedias, which aimed to compile essential knowledge on various subjects, were created through consultation and collaborative efforts among knowledgeable experts in the field. These experts, often academics carefully chosen by publishers and editors, contributed to the creation process. However, Wikipedia presents a new and remarkably distinct model for information and knowledge production. It operates through collaborative creation, theoretically open to anyone interested in participating, with editing conducted by the established community that has formed over the years. This model has both advantages and drawbacks. On one hand, it enables the presentation of the current state of knowledge on numerous subjects, while significantly reducing editing time, and including esoteric information that is relevant to very few people. On the other hand, this model has faced criticism for involving contributors with potentially less knowledge and expertise than those involved in the preparation of traditional encyclopedias. If the editing and writing processes are not sufficiently meticulous, it can compromise the quality of the final product.

The conditions for, as well as the characteristics *and impacts* of democratizing public discourse, can also be inferred from a growing array of initiatives. Linders (2012) has categorized these initiatives under headings like "Citizen Sourcing," "Government as a Platform," and "Do-It-Yourself Government." Similarly, Luyet et al. (2012) distinguish between levels of public involvement, spanning from the provision of "information" to "consultation," "collaboration," up to "co-decision."

These initiatives encompass crowdsourcing tasks in domains such as monitoring security cameras to detect traffic violations on hazardous roads, aiding in border control measures, participating in crime control initiatives, and partaking in regulatory monitoring and enforcement efforts (Logan, 2020; Megiddo, 2023; Koskela, 2010; Trottier, 2013; Yadin, 2023). In the context of this paper, a closely linked phenomenon is explored and dissected: the crowdsourcing of information and discussion concerning criminal investigations.

In order to investigate the democratization of legal public discourse, this article examines the characteristics and implications of digitization, transparency, and participatory discussions surrounding legal cases. Specifically, it focuses on the extensive public discourse on the Zadorov case through social media in Israel—a murder case that involves a substantial amount of evidence. The original district court verdict emphasizes that the conviction is built upon a "high-quality, comprehensive, and substantial body of evidence." This evidence includes confessions made to investigators, information from a police informant, reconstruction of events, familiarity with concealed details, and circumstantial evidence. However, the firmness of the verdict stood in stark contrast to the firmness of the public's verdict regarding the affair. Over time, people developed (1) a website through which most of the police and legal materials related to the case are open and accessible to the public, (2) Facebook groups on a very large scale where people can discuss and study issues related to the case, (3) there are also a number of YouTube channels, including the video materials related to the affair.

Police investigations and legal proceedings are often conducted behind closed doors, known only to a restricted group of professionals and officials such as police investigators, lawyers, and judges. As a consequence, the general public lacks access to these processes and lacks a platform for engaging in discussions about them. Consequently, the public's ability to access legal materials and engage in meaningful discourse about them is limited. Instead, the public primarily relies on processed information disseminated through institutionalized media channels for their understanding of legal matters.

But what happens when materials become available and a viable platform for discussion emerges? As mentioned, this article explores the features and consequences of digitization, transparency, and participatory discourse in relation to legal cases, with a specific focus on the extensive public discourse surrounding the Zadorov trial on social media. The media landscape surrounding the pursuit of justice for Zadorov is considerably more open, accessible, and conducive to discussion compared to the media environments surrounding similar cases in the past. Through an examination of the media landscape surrounding the Zadorov case, we can derive valuable insights into the characteristics of media engagement and its ramifications within analogous circumstances. As the accessibility to legal materials and opportunities for legal discourse continue to deepen over time, the significance of analyzing these aspects becomes increasingly important.

### Research environment: the public activity on social media for justice for Roman Zadorov

On December 6, 2006, the 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 a week later confessed to it. Two days after the reconstruction he again confessed and then immediately recanted, and has since denied any connection to the murder. Zadorov was convicted of murder in 2010 and sentenced to life in prison.

The verdict referred to a "high-quality, dense and real fabric of evidence" that points to Zadorov, including his confessions to an

informant and to police investigators, reconstruction of the murder, and a shoe imprint on the victim's pants that, according to the police expert, most likely originated from Zadorov's shoe. Arguably, quite a few concealed details emerged from Zadorov's confessions, including the toilet stall number in which the murder was committed, the resting position of the victim's body at the time of the murder, details about the incisions on the body, the knowledge that the victim was not raped, that the stall could not be locked from outside, and that the killer jumped out of the murder cell. 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.

But the firmness of the court's ruling contradicts the public's ruling, with opinion polls repeatedly showing that an over-whelming majority of the public thinks Zadorov is innocent. In 2021, the Supreme Court granted Zadorov a retrial, and in 2023 he was acquitted (Lev-On, 2023).

Already in the period immediately after the murder, the affair attracted the attention of the public, partly because the victim was a young girl murdered in the middle of the day in school- the place where we send our children in the expectation that they will study and have fun with their friends. This was and still is the first and only case in Israel of a murder that occurred on school grounds, while hundreds of students, teachers and administrative staff members were in the compound.

Another source that helped to cast doubt on Roman Zadorov's involvement in the murder was Tair Rada's mother. Shortly after Zadorov recounted how the murder was committed, she declared that she doubted whether he was indeed the murderer. Over the years, problems in Zadorov's confession and reconstruction on the basis of which he was convicted also contributed to these doubts—as well as the existence of alternative narratives about the identity of the murderer/s, the manner in which the murder was committed, and the motives behind it. Add to this a testimony by Adir Habani (in 2012, six years after the murder) that his then-girlfriend Ola Kravchenko confessed to him on the night of the murder that she was the actual killer and even showed him the murder tools and her blood-stained clothes,

More than 16 years since the murder, it is clear that the public and media interest in it has not waned. One of the factors responsible for this is the intensive activity to promote Zadorov's innocence on social media. Since 2009, and even more so since 2013, many Facebook groups have been established that deal with this affair. At the end of 2015, after Zadorov's appeal to the Supreme Court was rejected, the number of members of the groups soared, the largest of which, "The whole truth about the murder of the late Tair Rada," became one of the largest in Israel (Ben-Israel, 2016). The investigation materials were made available on the "Truth Today" website (starting in 2016). There are also a number of YouTube channels, including the video materials related to the affair (including the investigative videos, conversations with the police informer and the reconstruction).

Apart from its scope, the activity on social media for Zadorov is unique in other aspects (Lev-On, 2023):

1. The context: The activity takes place in the context of a murder trial and a call for justice for false convicts, from the activists' perspective. In contrast, findings and products of police investigations and legal proceedings are typically far from the public eye.
2. The identity of participants in the discourse: Typically, the partners in the public discourse regarding law and justice are "insiders": police officers, lawyers, judges, reporters and legal commentators. In the Zadorov case, however, the involvement of "outsiders" is evident—including activists who are familiar with small and large issues.
3. The activity is also unique in its significant effects; for example, on *public images* (for instance, the place where the murder took place and friends of Tair Rada who were accused online, without foundation, of involvement in the murder), and *opinions* (for instance, the functioning of the relevant state institutions and Zadorov's guilt/innocence).

This activity has kept the Tair Rada case in the media and on the public agenda for an extended period of time. It is also unique in how it has led to the many discoveries by activists who pore through the investigation materials, including ones that led to the decision to hold a retrial for Zadorov (Grossman and Lev-On, 2023).

For all these reasons, the activity on behalf of Zadorov represents a fascinating case for examining the characteristics and effects of social media activism. Next, I use it as an example of "democratizing discourse" in a legal context; that is, expanding the circle of participants in what was previously viewed as a closed legal discussion limited to a small number of stakeholders.

## Methods

This study is based on *Netnographic* research of social media activity surrounding the justice for Zadorov activism. Netno-graphy is a qualitative interpretive research approach—a digital version of ethnographic research that deals with the study of the behavioral and communicative patterns of individuals and groups on the Internet (Kozinets, 2019; Rageh and Melewar, 2013).

Netnography involves collecting data from various online sources such as social networks, chats, petition sites, sites for collaboratively creating documents and maps, and more. Researchers can identify online communities, observe, join and participate in them, and interview participants. The triangulation of participant observation, interviews and content analysis enables a comprehensive picture of justice for Zadorov activism. This netnographic study spanned a period of more than seven years, starting from December 2015, which marked the rejection of Zadorov's appeal to the Supreme Court and the subsequent escalation of activism. The study concluded in March 2023, coinciding with Zadorov's acquittal at the conclusion of his re-trial.:

**Observations of the activity**. Ongoing communication was established with group administrators and key activists throughout the study. These interactions included discussions about various issues and dilemmas arising from the content shared within the groups and the activities conducted. Netno-graphic research played a crucial role in gaining insights into group dynamics, including instances of group divisions and noteworthy discoveries made by activists.

**Analysis of content posted on social media groups**. A total of fifteen active Facebook groups focusing on justice for Zadorov were identified, collectively comprising over 300,000 members. The study involved real-time documentation of the posts and the corresponding responses generated within these groups. Daily sampling was conducted for the most active groups, while the remaining groups were sampled on a weekly basis.

**Interviews with social media group administrators**. A total of twenty-five interviews were conducted with administrators of different social media groups. These interviews covered various aspects, including the interviewees' background information (biographical details, knowledge, and opinions about the case),

perceptions of the goals and impact of activism, group management, and the perceived effects of their activities. Each interview lasted approximately one to one-and-a-half hours and took place in relaxed settings such as cafes to foster open and comfortable interactions. The interviews were conducted by four interviewers under the supervision of the lead researcher. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and subsequently analyzed for further examination and insights.

### The distinct characteristics of the media environment surrounding the activism for justice for Zadorov

Beyond the intense coverage of the Zadorov affair in the mainstream media, two related processes have contributed to public interest in this case kept it on the public agenda: The publication and accessibility of most investigative material, and the formation of Facebook groups dedicated to the Zadorov case based on such materials (Lev-On, 2022, 2023b). Thus, the media environment surrounding the justice for Zadorov activism exhibits three interrelated characteristics: (1) digitization of investigative materials, (2) public accessibility to these investigative materials, and (3) the existence of discursive platforms for public discussions on the case.

Although the focus of the discussion primarily centers on public discourse on social media, it is crucial to note that such discourse is influenced by the transparency and availability of investigative materials, which, in turn, rely on their digitized format.

To facilitate comprehension and streamline the paper's readability, Table 1 has been included. This table provides a comprehensive list of the conditions for, and characteristics *and impacts* of, democratizing public discourse about legal affairs, which will be expounded upon in the subsequent sections.

**Characteristic 1: Digitization**. In Israel, the Zadorov case often draws comparisons to the Amos Baranes affair. In 1976, Baranes was convicted of the murder of soldier Rachel Heller. Similar to Zadorov, Baranes initially confessed to and reenacted the murder, but later retracted his confession, maintaining his innocence. Baranes made several unsuccessful attempts to secure a retrial until finally, his application was accepted. The state was then required to submit the legal materials for the retrial on its behalf. These parallels between the Zadorov case and the Amos Baranes affair have prompted many discussions and comparisons within the Israeli context. A column written by Baruch Leshem (2014), who was a media consultant to the police minister, illustrates firsthand the dangers that exist when the legal material is not digitally documented. Leshem writes:

"For my sins I strike today. It may be that I'm responsible for Amos Baranes finally being acquitted of Rachel Heller's murder… When I was a graduate student in communications I decided to write a thesis on police investigations and their expression in the media. I chose the murder of the soldier Rachel Heller that occurred in 1974. At the time, I was a communications consultant to the police minister,

and I was given access to the investigative materials. I dove into the materials and put out a book on the case … The flaws that were under investigation led to the Supreme Court's decision for a re-trial. The State Attorney's Office said that it was unable to find all the files of the investigation, and rightly so - they were partly with me for the purpose of writing the book, and disappeared during my wanderings between student apartments. As a result, the trial did not take place and Baranes was awarded a "mute credit.""

Instances where authors take investigative materials to their homes and fail to return them (and subsequently write about them in the country's leading newspaper) are relatively uncommon. However, there have been cases where archives containing investigative materials have been subject to damage caused by natural disasters like fires or flooding. In other instances, these materials may mysteriously vanish without any clear explanation. Such occurrences highlight the challenges associated with preserving and safeguarding crucial investigative materials, underscoring the need for robust archival practices and security measures.

The media landscape surrounding discussions of law and justice in the Zadorov case diverges significantly from that of the Amos Baranes affair. A key distinguishing factor is the degree of *digitalization* involved in the respective cases. In the Zadorov case, the majority of investigative materials underwent digitization, enabling convenient access and widespread distribution. In contrast, documents related to the Amos Baranes investigation predominantly existed in physical form, archived on paper.

Throughout the Baranes inquiry, activities like scanning, replicating, and transferring materials incurred substantial costs and demanded extensive labor. Subsequent technological advancements have considerably mitigated the expenses and complexities associated with these processes. The significance of digitalization within the domain of media and information propagation has been extensively explored, as elucidated by Finnemann (2014).

**Characteristic 2: Transparency and accessibility**. The digitization of investigative materials facilitates their accessibility to the public, provided there is sufficient incentive or demand. This accessibility, in turn, enables mass scrutiny and criticism from various circles closely involved with the case as well as the general public. Granting "bottom-up" access to these materials represents the second stage of expanding the discourse and engagement surrounding legal cases, as demonstrated in this case. By making the materials readily available, a broader circle of people can participate in discussions and actions related to the case, leading to a more inclusive and informed public discourse on legal matters.

The extensive body of literature on transparency highlights the significant role of the Internet, particularly social media, in enabling citizens and organizations to access relevant information and make well-informed decisions based on it (Bertot et al.,

**Table 1 The conditions for, and characteristics and implications of, democratizing public discourse about legal affairs.**

| | |
|---|---|
| Characteristic 1 | Digitization of materials |
| Characteristic 2 | Transparency and accessibility of materials |
| Characteristic 3 | Existence of discursive arenas |
| Implication 1 | Preservation of materials related to individuals implicated in specific troublesome situations |
| Implication 2 | Utilization of "raw materials" to articulate stances and viewpoints |
| Implication 3 | Employment of materials to construct narratives that diverge significantly from those embraced by the establishment |
| Implication 4 | Recurrent references to private individuals or public officials who might be deemed unprofessional or even corrupt |

2010). However, we should also acknowledge the problematic aspects of openness and transparency on social media—a research area that has received limited attention. For instance, in the legal domain, authorities may exercise arbitrary control over the accessibility of certain materials, resulting in a partial representation of the evidence. Moreover, people exposed to these materials may lack the necessary tools to conduct a comprehensive and informed analysis. While these issues warrant further discussion, they are beyond the scope of the present article (Stohl et al., 2016; Bannister and Connolly, 2011 offer relevant insights in this regard).

Initially, the materials employed by Zadorov's defense team were shared with a range of professionals for consultation, as well as with the family of Tair Rada, who held no direct involvement in the legal proceedings. As time progressed, these resources gradually disseminated to a wider audience. They were made publicly accessible in popular text formats such as DOC or PDF files, presented as images, and even distributed in video form, simplifying ordinary individuals' ability to access them via their personal computers. Additionally, a multitude of scanned documents that were originally handwritten—such as the investigation log, reports, and police memos—likewise became available to the public.

Until 2016, certain portions of the legal material were sporadically distributed across various websites or social media groups, but they had not yet gained widespread availability. However, a significant change occurred that year with the establishment of the "Truth Today" website, which served as a central hub for all police, legal, media, and other materials related to the case. This website marked a notable milestone as it was the first instance, to the best of my knowledge, where all the legal and other materials pertaining to a legal case, particularly a murder case with a vast array of documents, were systematically uploaded to the Internet. The website provided a clear and accessible menu of navigational tools, allowing the public to easily navigate through the materials and access the information they sought.

However, even after these digital materials were opened to all, additional obstacles still needed to be overcome in order for the wider public to fully access them. For example, some of the documents were handwritten and difficult to read. To solve this problem, the site administrator with the assistance of volunteers transcribed these materials.

Another factor adding to the difficulty of making materials accessible to the public is language. The vast majority of Zadorov's investigations and conversations with police informants who were put in his prison cell were conducted in Russian, a language most of the Israeli public does not speak. Although the police sent these videotapes for translation, they were transferred to the defense (and later also to the general public) as printed PDF files, rather than as videos with subtitles (a service which the police are not obligated to perform), along with minor omissions. As a result, viewers (regardless of whether or not they speak Russian) did not have access to the complete and unedited version of the videos with subtitles, and thus were denied the opportunity to objectively evaluate this evidence. To remedy this state of affairs, a great deal of work was carried out by a small group of activists who re-translated, edited, and added subtitles to the video materials. After another debugging and repair process, the videos were uploaded to YouTube, where they are now publicly viewable, consisting of 110 h of "high quality" video which contains a conversation between those being filmed, and another 47 h of video did not include speech [i.e., mostly sleep] but nevertheless still needed to be parsed.

The observations made during the study of public activity on social media for justice for Zadorov indicate that the availability of investigation materials may have implications that are not immediately apparent. Rather than providing clarity, widespread public access to these materials can actually lead to confusion. The general public is not accustomed to regularly encountering legal materials, let alone vast amounts of them. As a result, individuals may mistakenly believe that the collected material they are exposed to represents the entirety of the investigative evidence. Consequently, if there are gaps in the evidence or if a particular context is not understood, some people may assume that no investigative activities have taken place or that a specific investigation has been neglected or manipulated. In reality, it is highly likely that investigative activities were indeed conducted in the same context, but the results may not have been submitted to the court and therefore are unavailable to users of the website.

**Characteristic 3: Conversations on social media**. Facebook was established in 2004 and within a few years had grown into a central arena for public discourse and opinion formation. As far as usage by country is concerned, Israel has skyrocketed in Facebook usage. In a 2011 study by ComScore, Israel was defined as the "world champion", with 53% of the population as Facebook users. Israelis spent an average of 11.1 h a month on Facebook, almost twice the global average of 5.7 h per month (Comscore, 2011). By the end of 2017, Facebook had approximately 5.8 million Israeli members (Internet World Stats, 2017). The activism for justice in the Zadorov case also found a home on Facebook for Zadorov would make Facebook it home. Groups focusing on the Zadorov case were initially established as early as 2009, even before Zadorov's conviction in the District Court. Following the dismissal of Zadorov's appeal to the Supreme Court in 2015, the membership count of these groups experienced a substantial surge. By mid-2019, the group membership exceeded a staggering quarter of a million (Lev-On and Steinfeld, 2020).

Beyond serving as platforms for the storage and dissemination of easily accessible uploaded content, the existence of large-scale Facebook groups holds significant implications. In these groups, administrators and activists take on roles as "mediators" or "commentators" who actively shape the agenda and framing of discussions, as observed by group members. This stands in stark contrast to traditional mainstream media, where reporters and legal commentators typically control the agenda and framing of legal matters. Unlike reporters in institutional media, Facebook group admins and prominent activists are not necessarily tied to or reliant on the establishment. On the contrary, their activism often arises from their own self-identification, accompanied by a strong sense of solidarity with the victimized and those who have been wronged by the establishment. This self-identification is further reinforced by their dedication and emotional attachment to the cause.

**Implications of the distinct characteristics of the media environment surrounding the activism for justice for Zadorov**
Up to this point, I have illustrated that the media landscape concerning activism for justice in the Zadorov case, a phenomenon gradually extending to other spheres, is defined by several pivotal attributes: the digitization of resources, heightened transparency, enhanced accessibility, and the proliferation of discussion platforms in social media. In the following paragraphs, I will provide a concise overview of some of the implications arising from these environmental conditions:

a. The preservation of materials on the Internet without an expiration date and the absence of a "right to be forgotten" for individuals mentioned in specific contexts.
b. The utilization of police, legal, media, and other materials as "raw material" for expressing positions and arguments, generating images and videos, and organizing collective action both online and offline;

c. The utilization of materials to construct narratives regarding the identity of the murderer, the motives behind the murder, and the sequence of events that led to it. These narratives often diverge significantly from those endorsed by the legal establishment;

d. The frequent references to private individuals or public servants who, arguably, exhibited unprofessionalism or even corruption.

**Implication 1: Perpetuation**. The first implication arising from the media landscape surrounding the activism for justice in the Zadorov case is the enduring online storage of materials, lacking any predetermined expiration date. This phenomenon sustains a specific state of knowledge pertaining to a subject or individual, rendering it accessible and available for an indeterminate duration.

As previously noted, the police inquiry in the case generated a substantial array of documented materials, subsequently undergoing digitization and subsequently uploading onto the Internet. This compilation encompasses investigations of many schoolchildren and residents, alongside police action reports, videos that chronicle the investigative procedures and the murder's reconstruction, and a host of other related materials. Notably, many of these resources include synopses and recollections contributed by police officers, intended to accurately reflect the given testimonies.

These materials are accessible to readers and pertain to the entire community, shedding light on relationships among teenagers and between teenagers and their teachers. They offer insights into the daily routines of students and also provide information about individuals who were observed in situations perceived as problematic or reported to have exhibited abnormal behavior.

The availability of such materials in the public domain can have a lasting impact on the lives of the individuals featured in them. Teenagers and adults who were subjects of investigation during that time have since grown up and moved on with their lives. However, the materials and information collected about them all those years ago still remain accessible. Consequently, their lives, especially those of the teenagers, were thrust into the public spotlight. In today's digital age, people have become more accustomed to sharing private details, daily routines, experiences, and opinions on social media. For instance, one boy involved in the Zadorov case was documented as saying, "I could save someone's life." Despite the fact that his original statement to the television crew was counterfactual and unrelated to the actual murder, posts about him still occasionally resurface on social media.

Formerly the deputy head of the Katzrin local council, Uri Zechariah, had a close relationship with the family of the murder victim. In a Facebook post, he used a metaphorical comparison, likening Katzrin to an aquarium and suggesting that its residents are akin to fish:

> The prevailing skepticism among millions of individuals has given rise to a multitude of investigators and self-proclaimed experts. These individuals tirelessly delve into the case, scrutinizing, questioning, and probing. Their fervor shows no signs of abating; instead, it continues to intensify over the course of a decade. Astonishingly and alarmingly, some people possess copies of investigative materials that are truly remarkable. They engage in ceaseless online digging, scouring websites, seeking photo albums, and delving into the intimate personal details of Katzrin's residents. They possess addresses, phone numbers, workplace information, and even knowledge of illnesses. It is simply mind-boggling at what extraordinary levels this obsession has reached. Some of these individuals may even come across this post and respond. In essence, we have become like goldfish in an aquarium, perpetually exposed for all to see from every angle.[1]

**Implication 2: Creating visual materials**. The second consequence of the media environment surrounding the activism for justice for Zadorov is the utilization of the raw material available on the Internet to construct arguments, express opinions and emotions, address issues, and generate visual materials. For space limitations, I focus here on the creation of visual content (elsewhere, see Lev-On, 2023a).

The emphasis on visual activity and on the *visual* materials produced by activists is justified for a number of reasons. First, the literature suggests that visual information is *processed* in the brain faster than textual information (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006; Silveira et al., 2015; Powell et al., 2018); better *absorbed and retained* than textual information (Graber, 1990; Grimes, 1990; Zillmann et al., 2001; Coleman, 2010; Keib et al., 2018); helps to *change attitudes* more significantly than change created from textual information alone (Paivio and Csapo, 1973; Schneider and Maasen, 1998; Hart and Feldman, 2016; Soroka et al., 2016; Schmuck and Matthes, 2017); has a greater *emotional* effect on recipients (Dillard and Wilson, 1993); and *drives action* more significantly than textual information (LeDoux, 1986; Hart and Feldman, 2016; Keib et al., 2018).

Second, literature in the legal context also recognizes the impact of visual content impacts the conduct of stakeholders in legal proceedings (Porter, 2014). Research on social movements also shows that visual materials are of great importance when it comes to attracting the attention of activists and the media and motivating them to action (Mattoni and Teune, 2014; Doerr, Mattoni and Teune, 2015; Neumayer and Rossi, 2018; Kilgo et al., 2018).

One of the key characteristics of justice for Zadorov activism on social media is the abundant and easily accessible availability of "raw materials" from various sources such as the police, legal, media, and other domains. Moreover, many individuals have access to photo and video editing software that enables them to manipulate and process these materials. Additionally, online tools and resources like Google Maps, population data, statistics from the Central Bureau of Statistics website, and more, can be utilized to generate relevant textual and visual information. All of these resources contribute to the creation of additional layers of meaning on the raw materials by activists, enhancing the depth and impact of their messages.

Visual elements act as anchors for making assertions, and the extent of processing can vary from simple to highly sophisticated. The accompanying images exemplify the kind of raw materials used to create visuals and memes. For instance, Fig. 1 is based on an image taken at the murder scene, where users have chosen to emphasize specific details such as the width of the floor and the footprints discovered at the scene. The Hebrew text in the image states: "Footprint 6 on the right foot, footprint 4 on the left foot. Arrows indicate the knees. A gray line highlights the toilet seat."[2]

The available materials also serve as the foundation for creating memes derived from illustrations, memos, summaries, and other sources found in the legal file. Additionally, activists contribute additional materials from their own sources, including images of individuals, events, buildings, photographs of the community, and the surrounding area. For instance, Fig. 2[3] is based on a photograph taken at a Supreme Court event, where the creator

**Fig. 1 Meme based on the scene of the murder.** This figure is covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.



**Fig. 2 Meme based on a photograph from a Supreme Court event.** This figure is covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

incorporated Zadorov's image in a prison uniform as an added element.

**Implication 3: Creating narratives**. In the preceding section, I discussed how the media environment surrounding the Zadorov case is marked by an abundance of raw materials, along with the advanced processing capabilities of activists. This section will illustrate how these capabilities enable individuals to construct entire narratives about the murder. These narratives may encompass various aspects, including the identity of the perpetrator(s), the motives behind the murder, and the sequence of events leading up to it. These alternative stories can differ significantly from the narrative embraced by the courts (Lev-On, 2023a).

In the regular course of events, judges are presented with narratives from both the defense and prosecution, along with the supporting evidence and findings. They may visit the crime scene, listen to expert witnesses, and ultimately decide which narrative to accept. The materials upon which their decision is made are typically not accessible to the general public, who often rely on fragmented information obtained through the media.

However, in the case of Zadorov file, the situation is different. People have access to videos of investigations, confessions, and reconstructions, often accompanied by activist-generated subtitles that were not available to the judges during the original criminal proceedings. Additionally, individuals can view the evidence gathered by the police and read police officers' memoirs documenting their investigative actions. Some may even come

across photographs from the murder scene itself. Furthermore, people are influenced by exposure to various media sources, including documentaries, TV segments, numerous press articles, and, notably, the online content that continues to surface on Facebook groups, even years after the murder occurred.

While activist narratives may not have the power to directly impact the decisions of the legal establishment, they can still influence public opinion regarding legal cases, potentially eroding trust in the legal system. However, in presenting alternative scenarios for the murder, they may also inadvertently contribute to the propagation of conspiracy theories. This can result in reputational harm to innocent individuals who may be falsely implicated, either directly or indirectly, in the murder.

The narratives prevalent within the groups advocating for justice for Zadorov overwhelmingly support the notion that he is not the perpetrator of Tair Rada's murder. Amidst the abundance of raw materials available to the public, some individuals take it a step further by creating alternative narratives. One such narrative proposes that the murder was carried out by teenagers, with suggestions that the victim's friends may have knowledge of the crime or even involvement in it. Another narrative suggests that Rada was ensnared in a drug-related incident, setting off a chain of events leading to her murder. A third narrative speculates that she was killed by members of a satanic cult. Yet another narrative claims that the murderer suffered from severe mental health issues. Some even believe that the murder is connected to a conflict between the killer and members of Rada's family.

All of these narratives are derived from police investigations, and when presented online with supporting materials such as phone data records, suspicious statements from chat conversations, and other findings, they may gain a sense of credibility. However, it is not always made public that the police investigations have actually debunked these narratives. On social media platforms, the assessment of evidence is conducted differently, allowing these narratives to take on a life of their own and persist even years after they have been disproven.

In reality, many of these narratives were initially proposed as scenarios by the police but were subsequently systematically ruled out. However, some of these scenarios were not thoroughly investigated by the police and were created to fill perceived gaps in the case. For instance, one scenario suggests that Rada was murdered in a different location, referred to as a "secondary arena," and her body was later moved to the toilet stall where it was discovered (as depicted in Fig. 3).[4]

This particular narrative stems from witnesses reporting that the booth where the body was discovered was found open for hours after the alleged time of the murder. Users who are inclined to construct this narrative reject the notion that these witnesses may have been mistaken. Instead, they use this information to support the belief that the murder took place elsewhere and the body was subsequently moved to the toilet stall.

**Implication 4: Impact on individuals and on the establishment**. In the preceding sections, I provided a brief overview of the implications arising from the media environment surrounding the Zadorov case. One significant implication is that the materials pertaining to the case persist indefinitely without being forgotten. Furthermore, individuals utilize these raw materials to construct narratives that largely deviate from the one embraced by the judiciary.

It is essential to consider the impact of this type of activism on its intended targets, including stakeholders and government establishments. For instance, one stakeholder group affected by these narratives is the youth. Despite the absence of any investigative evidence, there is a belief held by many that students

**Dan Erez** ▶ Time for the truth in the late Tair Rada murder case
May 18 at 14:17pm

The chain of events in the case:

(1) Drugs, prostitution and violence in the school.

(2) Discussions in the town committee.

(3) Raising the need for practical actions due to the incompetence of the local police and cooperation with criminals

(4) Specific information provided to the Galilee Youth Exposure unit while bypassing local police.

(5) Extensive arrests and seizure of drugs about two months before the murder.

(6) A central character who is not arrested.

(7) An ambush is organized against Tair.

(8) Attempts are made to bring her to a meeting without success.

(9) A decision is made to carry it out at the school.

(10) Intention and start of threat / treatment call.

(11) The temptation in the form of a guy she loves.

(12) A place and a key are organized.

(13) She arrives at the scene and meets the attackers of stage A.

(14) She does not cooperate and attacks them and receives, among other things, seven hits to the head and minor cuts to the face and fingers.

In the struggle she grabs the hair of her attackers.

(15) She falls unconscious at least from the beatings...

(16) The attackers are frightened by the serious result of the ambush.

(17) Telephone consultations are held with external parties.

(18) "Cleaners" are invited to the place on behalf of the "responsible adult".

(19) After two hours she is transferred to the bathroom.

(20) In the toilets, stage B of the slaughter and camouflage of the real causes is carried out.

(21) Leaving the arena through the window above the toilet booth

**Fig. 3 The "secondary arena" scenario.** This figure is covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Reproduced with permission of Dan Erez; copyright © Dan Erez.



**Fig. 4 An illustration of the murderers who recant the murder.** This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.



**Fig. 5 Silent girls.** This figure is covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

from the school were somehow involved in the murder. Some even go as far as accusing Tair Rada's friends of having knowledge about the crime and deliberately withholding information or potentially being directly involved. Consequently, over the years, these individuals have faced a deluge of slander and harassment. For instance, Fig. 4[5], uploaded by one of the administrators of the largest Facebook group advocating for justice for Zadorov, exemplifies the impact of such narratives. The illustration depicts the bathroom where Tair Rada's body was discovered, with added silhouettes of girls supposedly confessing to the murder and an individual resembling an investigator with a microphone. The caption accompanying the image unequivocally asserts: "See for yourself, justice is served, the murderers are confessing." Such visual content, accompanied by definitive statements, can reinforce the belief in alternative narratives and contribute to the perpetuation of misinformation.

Another example of activist-generated content is seen in Fig. 5[6], where a collage of four individuals, implied to be connected to the case, is created by an activist. Using editing software, their images are arranged in a 2 × 2 grid, and their mouths are intentionally blurred to suggest their silence and alleged concealment of information they may possess. This visual manipulation aims to insinuate their involvement or knowledge in the case, further contributing to the proliferation of alternative

**Fig. 6 Sewing files unit.** This figure is covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

narratives and potentially leading to unwarranted speculation and public scrutiny.

In addition to the defamation of private individuals, it is also worth noting the defamation of public servants who are perceived as representative of the establishment. Figure 6[7] illustrates this, displaying the faces of prosecutors in the top row and police officers in the bottom row, all of whom have been involved in the Zadorov case. The inclusion of these individuals' images in such a context suggests an attempt to attribute blame, question their credibility, or even insinuate their alleged involvement in any perceived wrongdoing. Such visual representations can contribute to negative public perceptions and undermine trust in the institutions and individuals involved in the case (Lev-On, 2023).

## Conclusions

This article focuses on the public activism surrounding the Zadorov case, portraying it as an exemplar of "democratizing discourse" within the legal context. It delves deeply into an examination of this unique media ecosystem, encompassing facets such as digitization, transparency, accessibility, and the presence of platforms for discourse. Furthermore, it delves into the extensive implications of this ecosystem, which include the enduring availability of materials, the creation of visual content, the formulation of alternative narratives related to the murder, and the far-reaching effects on both individuals and institutions entangled in the case.

By illuminating these facets, the article sought to demonstrate how cases like the activity for justice for Zadorov extend the involvement in legal affairs, affording a broader spectrum of participants the opportunity to partake in the conversation. Through the digitization and enhanced accessibility of resources, coupled with the leverage of social media platforms, activists have been empowered to express their viewpoints, produce visual content, and formulate alternative narratives that deviate from the established legal standpoint.

It is important to recognize that this expanded discourse has both positive and negative consequences. On one hand, it allows for greater public engagement and the exploration of different perspectives. On the other hand, it can lead to the spread of misinformation, the defamation of individuals, and a loss of trust in the legal system.

Overall, social media has significantly impacted the media environment surrounding legal cases. It has facilitated the digitization, transparency, and accessibility of legal materials, and it has provided a platform for broader participation and discourse among citizens and stakeholders. The activism for justice for Zadorov encompasses various problematic phenomena, ranging from the creation of unfounded narratives to the dissemination of rumors and falsehoods. These actions can lead to the harassment and defamation of individuals who were not implicated or suspected by the investigation.

Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognize that the broadening of public discourse within a legal framework also offers numerous positive aspects. These benefits encompass the inherent value to individuals through heightened public interest and engagement, the potential for civic education by examining law enforcement and judicial materials, active participation in citizen discussions, and an improved comprehension of the operations of pertinent institutional entities (Lev-On, 2023). This kind of activism can also shine a spotlight on contentious issues, acting as a catalyst for demanding accountability from institutional bodies and dissuading them from engaging in misconduct. Moreover, members of the public can offer invaluable support to the parties involved in the legal process. They might uncover inaccuracies and shortcomings in the investigation, shed light on overlooked discoveries, and critically analyze both the materials from the original investigation and any new evidence that has surfaced over time. This collaborative effort can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the case and potentially unveil new insights.

The ongoing trends of online digitization, transparency, accessibility, and conversation are here to stay. The establishment is faced with the challenge of not only addressing the problematic aspects of social media activism in the legal domain but also finding ways to engage with it and harness its potential for added value. There is a need to explore how the establishment can effectively interact with social media activism to benefit both the establishment itself and the wider public. This may involve developing strategies to address misinformation, fostering constructive dialog, and leveraging the collective intelligence and resources available online to enhance the legal process and improve accountability.

## Notes

1 A screenshot of the post is with the author.
2 Who murdered Tair Rada?? Zadorov trial!, 2013. 3.87.
3 The whole truth about the late Tair Rada murder case, 2017. 1.105.
4 Time for the truth in the late Tair Rada murder case, 2018. 1.368.
5 The whole truth about the late Tair Rada murder case, 2014. 3.125.
6 The whole truth about the late Tair Rada murder case. 2018. 3.259.
7 The whole truth about the late Tair Rada murder case. 2018. 3.286.

## References

Bannister F, Connolly R (2011) The trouble with transparency: a critical review of openness in e-government. Policy Internet 3(1):1–30

Ben-Israel D (2016) "The Tube" celebrates 900K and Ynet is in a hysterical pressure: ranking of Facebook pages for January 2016. Mizbala. http://mizbala.com/digital/social-media/109150

Benkler Y (2006) The wealth of networks: how social production transforms markets and freedom. New Haven, CA: Yale University Press

Bertot JC, Jaeger PT, Grimes JM (2010) Using ICTs to create a culture of transparency: E-government and social media as openness and anti-corruption tools for societies. Gov Inf Q 27(3):264–271

Coleman R (2010) Framing the pictures in our heads. Exploring the framing and agenda-setting effects of visual images. In: D'Angelo P, Kuypers JA (eds) Doing news framing analysis: empirical and theoretical perspectives. Routledge, New York, pp 233–261

Comscore (2011) It's a social world: top 10 need-to-knows about social networking and where it's headed. http://www.comscore.com/it_is_a_social_world

DePaula N, Dincelli E, Harrison TM (2018) Toward a typology of government social media communication: democratic goals, symbolic acts and self-presentation. Gov Inf Q 35(1):98–108

Dillard JP, Wilson BJ (1993) Communication and affect: thoughts, feelings, and issues for the future. Commun Res 20:637–646

Doerr N, Mattoni A, Teune S (2015) Visuals in social movements. In: della Porta D, Diani M (eds) The Oxford handbook of social movements. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp 557–566

Dryzek JS (2009) Democratization as deliberative capacity building. Comp Polit Stud 42(11):1379–1402

Findlay L (2015) Courting social media in Australia's criminal courtrooms: the continuing tension between promoting open justice and protecting procedural integrity. Curr Issues Crim Justice 27(2):237–245

Finnemann NO (2014) Digitization: new trajectories of mediatization? Mediatiz Commun 21:297–321

Fountain JE (2001) Building the virtual state: information technology and institutional change. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press

Fox RL, Rose M (2014) Public engagement with the criminal justice system in the age of social media. Oñati Socio-Legal Series, vol 4 (4):771–798

Geddes B (1999) What do we know about democratization after twenty years? Annu Rev Polit Sci 2(1):115–144

Graber DA (1990) Seeing is remembering: how visuals contribute to learning from television news. J Commun 40(3):134–156

Grimes T (1990) Audio-video correspondence and its role in attention and memory. Educ Technol Res Dev 38(3):15–25

Grossman N, Lev-On A (2023) Social media jurors: conceptualizing and analyzing online public engagement in reference to legal cases. Crime Law Soc Change 79(3):223–240

Hart PS, Feldman L (2016) The impact of climate change–related imagery and text on public opinion and behavior change. Sci Commun 38(4):415–441

Internet World Stats (2017) http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm

Jiménez-Gómez CE, Gascó-Hernández M (eds) (2016) Achieving open justice through citizen participation and transparency. Hershey, PA: IGI Global

Keib K, Espina C, Lee YI, Wojdynski BW, Choi D, Bang H (2018) Picture this: the influence of emotionally valenced images, on attention, selection, and sharing of social media news. Media Psychol 21(2):202–221

Kilgo DK, Harlow S, García-Perdomo V, Salaverría R (2018) From# Ferguson to# Ayotzinapa: analyzing differences in domestic and foreign protest news shared on social media. Mass Commun Soc 21(5):606–630

Koskela H (2010) Did you spot an alien? Voluntary vigilance, borderwork and the Texas virtual border watch program. Space Polity 14(2):103–121

Kozinets R (2019) Netnography: the essential guide to social media research. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE

Kress G, Van Leeuwen T (2006) Reading images: the grammar of visual images. London, UK: Routledge

LeDoux JE (1986) Sensory systems and emotion: a model of affective processing. Integr Psychiatry 4(4):237–243

Leshem B (2014) Confession is confession is confession. Yediot Aharonot

Lev-On A (2022) Polarization of deliberative and participatory activists in social media. Media Commun 10(4):56–65

Lev-On A (2023) The murder of Tair Rada and the trial of Roman Zadorov: establishment, justice, citizens and social media. Rishon Lezion, Israel: Yedioth Books

Lev-On A (2023a) Making sense of murder: characterizing stories in social media groups. Media Cult Soc (in press)

Lev-On A (2023b) Organizing online protest: characteristics of administrators of activist groups on social media. Int J Media Cult Polit (in press)

Lev-On A, Steinfeld N (2020) "Objection, your honor": use of social media by civilians to challenge the criminal justice system. Soc Sci Comput Rev 38(3):315–333

Linders D (2012) From e-government to we-government: defining a typology for citizen coproduction in the age of social media. Gov Inf Q 29(4):446–454

Logan WA (2020) Crowdsourcing crime control. Texas Law Rev 99:137–163

Luyet V, Schlaepfer R, Parlange MB, Buttler A (2012) A framework to implement stakeholder participation in environmental projects. J Environ Manag 111:213–219

Mattoni A, Teune S (2014) Visions of protest: a media-historic perspective on images in social movements. Sociol Compass 8(6):876–887

McLachlin B (2003) Courts, transparency and public confidence-to the better administration of justice [Edited version of the 2003 Deakin Law School Oration, delivered on 16 Apr 2003]. Deakin Law Rev 8(1):1–11

Megiddo T (2023) Crowdwashing surveillance; crowdsourcing domination. Law Ethics Human Rights 17(1):67–94

Mergel I (2013) Social media adoption and resulting tactics in the U.S. federal government. Gov Inf Q 30(2):123–130

Neumayer C, Rossi L (2018) Images of protest in social media: struggle over visibility and visual narratives. New Media Soc 20(11):4293–4310

Paivio A, Csapo K (1973) Picture superiority in free recall: imagery or dual coding? Cogn Psychol 5:176–206

Papacharissi Z (2004) Democracy online: civility, politeness, and the democratic potential of online political discussion groups. New Media Soc 6(2):259–283

Parkinson J, Mansbridge J (eds) (2012) Deliberative systems: deliberative democracy at the large scale. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press

Porter EG (2014) Taking images seriously. Columbia Law Rev 114:1687–1782

Powell TE, Boomgaarden HG, De Swert K, de Vreese CH (2018) Framing fast and slow: a dual processing account of multimodal framing effects. Media Psychol 22(4):572–600

Rageh A, Melewar TC (2013) Using netnography research method to reveal the underlying dimensions of the customer/tourist experience. Qual Mark Res 16(2):126–149

Schmuck D, Matthes J (2017) Effects of economic and symbolic threat appeals in right-wing populist advertising on anti-immigrant attitudes: the impact of textual and visual appeals. Polit Commun 34(4):607–626

Schneider W, Maasen S (Eds.) (1998) Mechanisms of visual attention: a cognitive neuroscience perspective. Hove, UK: Psychology Press

Silveira S, Fehse K, Vedder A, Elvers K, Hennig-Fast K (2015) Is it the picture or is it the frame? An fMRI study on the neurobiology of framing effects. Front Hum Neurosci 9:528

Soroka S, Loewen P, Fournier P, Rubenson D (2016) The impact of news photos on support for military action. Polit Commun 33(4):563–582

Stohl C, Stohl M, Leonardi PM (2016) Managing opacity: information visibility and the paradox of transparency in the digital age. Int J Comm 10:15

Trottier D (2013) Crowdsourcing CCTV surveillance on the Internet. Inf Commun Soc 17(5):609–626

Ure M (2019) Social media use in justice administration: disintermediation, conversation and collaboration. Glob Media J 17(32):172

Warren M (2014) Open justice in the technological age. Monash Univ Law Rev 40(1):45–58

Yadin S (2023) The crowdsourcing of regulatory monitoring and enforcement. Law Ethics Hum Rights 17(1):95–125

Zillmann D, Knobloch S, Yu H (2001) Effects of photographs on the selective reading of news reports. Media Psychol 3(4):301–324

## Author contributions

The author is fully and solely responsible for conducting the study and preparing the manuscript.

## Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

## Ethical approval

This research received ethical approval from the committee for non-medical studies (Date: 8/29/2023, No. of Approval: AU-COM-ALO-20230829).

## Informed consent

Prior to conducting the interviews, informed consent was obtained from all interviewees. At the beginning of each interview, the participants were provided with information regarding the overall objectives and the specific questions that would be asked during the interview. Additionally, they were explicitly informed that they had the right to decline to answer any questions or even terminate the interview at any point if they chose to do so.

## Additional information

**Correspondence** and requests for materials should be addressed to Azi Lev-On.

**Reprints and permission information** is available at http://www.nature.com/reprints

**Publisher's note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.